



"I've been robbed!" Mrs. Lear proclaimed wildly.
"Hoofbeats on the Turnpike" (See Page 100)

Hoofbeats on the Turnpike

By

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MILDRED A. WIRT MYSTERY STORIES
PENNY PARKER MYSTERY STORIES

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PENNY PARKER

MYSTERY STORIES

TALE OF THE WITCH DOLL
THE VANISHING HOUSEBOAT
DANGER AT THE DRAWBRIDGE
BEHIND THE GREEN DOOR
CLUE OF THE SILKEN LADDER
THE SECRET PACT
THE CLOCK STRIKES THIRTEEN
THE WISHING WELL
SABOTEURS ON THE RIVER
GHOST BEYOND THE GATE
HOOFBEATS ON THE TURNPIKE

Other Titles in Preparation

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Hoofbeats on the Turnpike

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CONTENTS

1	OLD MAN OF THE HILLS	1
2	PLANS	9
3	INTO THE VALLEY	18
4	A STRANGER OF THE ROAD	28
5	SLEEPY HOLLOW ESTATE	40
6	GHOSTS AND WITCHES	48
7	BED AND BOARD	60
8	A RICH MAN'S TROUBLES	70
9	STRAIGHT FROM THE SHOULDER	78
10	BARN DANCE	86
11	THE HEADLESS HORSEMAN	93
12	PREMONITIONS	101
13	RAIN	107
14	A MOVING LIGHT	116
15	INTO THE WOODS	126
16	A FRUITLESS SEARCH	134
17	ACCUSATIONS	140
18	FLOOD WATERS	151
19	TRAGEDY	158
20	EMERGENCY CALL	165
21	A MYSTERY EXPLAINED	175
22	WANTED—A WIRE	184
23	TOLL LINE TO RIVERVIEW	192
24	A BIG STORY	199
25	MISSION ACCOMPLISHED	205

CHAPTER

1

OLD MAN OF THE HILLS

A GIRL in crumpled linen slacks skidded to a fast stop on the polished floor of the *Star* business office. With a flourish, she pushed a slip of paper through the bars of the treasurer's cage. She grinned beguilingly at the man who was totaling a long column of figures.

"Top o' the morning, Mr. Peters," she chirped. "How about cashing a little check for me?"

The bald-headed, tired looking man peered carefully at the crisp rectangle of paper. Regretfully he shook his head.

"Sorry, Miss Parker. I'd like to do it, but orders are orders. Your father said I wasn't to pass out a penny without his okay."

"But I'm stony broke! I'm destitute!" The blue eyes became eloquent, pleading. "My allowance doesn't come due for another ten days."

"Why not talk it over with your father?"

Penny retrieved the check and tore it to bits. "I've already worked on Dad until I'm blue in the face," she grumbled. "Talking to a mountain gives one a lot more satisfaction."

"Now you know your father gives you almost everything you want," the treasurer teased. "You have a car of your own—"

"And no gas to run it," Penny cut in. "Why, I work like a galley slave helping Dad build up the circulation of this newspaper!"

"You have brought the *Star* many new subscribers," Mr. Peters agreed warmly. "I'll always remember that fine story you wrote about the Vanishing Houseboat Mystery. It was one of the best this paper ever published."

"What's the use of being the talented, only daughter of a prosperous newspaper owner if you can't cash in on it now and then?" Penny went on. "Why, the coffers of this old paper fairly drip gold, but do I ever get any of it?"

"I'll let you have a few dollars," Mr. Peters offered unexpectedly. "Enough to tide you over until the day your allowance falls due. You see, I know how it is because I have a daughter of my own."

Penny's chubby, freckled face brightened. Then the light faded. She asked doubtfully:

"You don't intend to give me the money out of your own pocket, Mr. Peters?"

"Why, yes. I wouldn't dare go against your father's orders, Penny. He said no more of your checks were to be cashed without his approval."

Unfolding several crisp new bills from his wallet, the treasurer offered them to Penny. She gazed at the money with deep longing, then firmly pushed it back.

"Thanks, Mr. Peters, but it has to be Dad's money or none. You see, I have a strict code of honor."

"Sorry," replied the treasurer. "I'd like to help you."

"Oh, I'll struggle on somehow."

With a deep sigh, Penny turned away from the cage. She was a slim, blue-eyed girl whose enthusiasms often carried her into trouble. Her mother was dead, but though she had been raised by Mrs. Weems, a faithful housekeeper, she was not in the least spoiled. Nevertheless, because her father, Anthony Parker, publisher of the *Riverview Star* was indulgent, she usually had her way about most matters. From him she had learned many details of the newspaper business. In fact, having a flare for reporting, she had written many of the paper's finest stories.

Penny was a friendly, loveable little person. Not for long could she remain downhearted. As she walked down the long hallway, its great expanse of polished floor suddenly looked as inviting as an ice pond. With a quick little run she slid its length.

And at the elevator corner she collided full-tilt with a bent old man who hobbled along on a crooked hickory cane.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry!" Penny apologized. "I didn't know anyone was coming. I shouldn't have taken this hall on high."

The unexpected collision had winded the old man. He staggered a step backwards and Penny grasped his arm to offer support. She could not fail to stare. Never before in the *Star* office had she seen such a queer looking old fellow. He wore loose-fitting, coarse garments with heavy boots. His hair, snow white, had not been cut in many weeks. The grotesque effect was heightened by a straw hat several sizes too small which was perched atop his head.

"I'm sorry," Penny repeated. "I guess I didn't know where I was going."

"Pears like we is in the same boat, Miss," replied the old man in a cracked voice. "'Lows as how I don't know where I'm goin' my own self."

"Then perhaps I can help you. Are you looking for someone in this building?"

The old man took a grimy sheet of paper from a tattered coat pocket.

"I want to find the feller who will print this advertisement for me," he explained carefully. "I want everybody who takes the newspaper to read it. I got cash money to pay for it too." He drew a greasy

bill from an ancient wallet and waved it proudly before Penny. "Ye see, Miss, I got cash money. I ain't no moocher."

Penny hid a smile. Not only did the old man look queer but his conversation was equally quaint. She thought that he must come from an isolated hill community many miles distant.

"I'll show you the way to the ad department," she offered, guiding him down the hall. "I see you have your advertisement written out."

"Yes, Miss." The old man hobbled along beside her. "My old woman wrote it all down. She was well edjikated before we got hitched."

Proudly he offered Penny the paper which bore several lines of neatly inscribed script. The advertisement, long and awkwardly worded, offered for sale an old spinning wheel, an ancient loom and a set of wool carders.

"My old woman used to be one o' the best weavers in Hobostein county," the old man explained with pride. "She could make a man a pair o' jeans that'd wear like they had growed to his hide. But they ain't no call for real 'weavin' no more. Everything is cheapened down machine stuff these days."

"Where is your home?" Penny questioned curiously.

"Me and my old woman was born and raised in the Red River Valley. Ever been there?"

"No, I can't say I have."

"It's one of the purtiest spots God ever made," the old man said proudly. "You never seen such green pastures, an' the hills kinda take your breath away. Only at night there's strange creatures trackin' through the woods, and some says there's haunts—"

Penny glanced quickly at her companion. "Haunts?" she inquired.

Before the old man could answer they had reached the want-ad counter. An employee of the paper immediately appeared to accept the advertisement. His rapid-fire questions as he counted words and assessed charges, bewildered the old hillman. Penny supplied the answers as best she could. However, in her haste to be finished with the task, she forgot to have the old fellow leave name and address.

"You were saying something about haunts," she reminded him eagerly as they walked away from the desk. "You don't really believe in ghosts do you, Mister—"

"Silas Malcom," the old man supplied. "That's my name and there ain't a better one in Hobostein County. So you be interested in haunts?"

"Well, yes, I am," Penny admitted, her eyes dancing. "I like all types of mystery. Just lead me to it!"

"Well, here's something that will make your pretty eyes pop." Chuckling, the old man fumbled in his

pocket and produced a worn newspaper clipping. Penny saw that it had been clipped from the Hobostein County Weekly. It read:

"Five hundred dollars reward offered for any information leading to the capture of the Headless Horseman. For particulars see J. Burmaster, Sleepy Hollow."

"This is a strange advertisement," Penny commented aloud. "The only Headless Horseman to my knowledge was the famous Galloping Hessian in the story, 'Legend of Sleepy Hollow.' But in reality such things can't exist."

"Maybe not," said the old man, "but we got one in the valley just the same. An' if what folks says is so, that Headless Horseman's likely to make a heap o' trouble fer someone before he's through his hauntin'."

Penny stared soberly into the twinkling blue eyes of her aged companion. As a character he completely baffled her. Did he mean what he said or was he merely trying to lead her on with hints of mystery? At any rate, the bait was too tempting to resist.

"Tell me more," she urged. "Exactly what do you know about this advertisement?"

"Nothin'. Nary a thing, Miss. But there's haunts at Sleepy Hollow and don't you think there ain't. I've seen 'em myself from Witching Rock."

"And where is Witching Rock?" Even the words intrigued Penny.

"Jest a place on Humpy Hill lookin' down over the Valley."

Finding her companion none too willing to impart additional information, Penny reread the advertisement. The item had appeared in the Hobostein County paper only the previous week. The words themselves rather than the offer of a reward enchanted her.

"Headless Horseman—Witching Rock!" she thought excitedly. "Why, even the names scream of mystery!"

Aloud she urged: "Mr. Malcom, do tell me more about the matter. Who is Mr. Burmaster?"

There was no answer. Penny glanced up from the advertisement and stared in astonishment. The elderly man no longer stood beside her. Not a soul was in the long empty hall. The old man of the hills had vanished as quietly as if spirited away by an unseen hand.

CHAPTER

2

PLANS

"NOW WHAT became of that old man?" Penny asked herself in perplexity. "I didn't hear him steal away. He couldn't have vanished into thin air! Or did he?"

Thinking that Mr. Malcom might have gone back to the want-ad department, she hastily returned there. To her anxious inquiry, the clerk responded with a grin:

"No, Old Whiskers hasn't been here. If you find him, ask for his address. He forgot to leave it."

Decidedly disturbed, Penny ran down the hall which gave exit to the street. Breathlessly she asked the elevator attendant if he had seen an old man leave the building.

"A fellow with a long white beard?"

"Yes, and a cane. Which way did he go?"

"Can't tell you that."

"But you did see him?" Penny demanded impatiently.

"Sure, he went out the door a minute or two ago. He was talking to himself like he was a bit cracked in the head. He was chuckling as if he knew a great joke."

"And I'm it," Penny muttered.

She darted through the revolving doors to the street. With the noon hour close at hand throngs of persons poured from the various offices. Amid the bustling, hurrying crowd she saw no one who remotely resembled the old man of the hills.

"He slipped away on purpose!" she thought half-resentfully. "He gave me the newspaper clipping just to stir my interest, and then left without explaining a thing!"

Abandoning the search as hopeless, Penny again reread the clipping. Five hundred dollars offered for information leading to the capture of a Headless Horseman! Why, it sounded fantastic. But the advertisement actually had appeared in a country newspaper. Therefore, it must have some basis of fact.

Still mulling the matter over in her mind, Penny climbed a long flight of stairs to the *Star* news room. Near the door stood an empty desk. For many years that desk had been occupied by Jerry Livingston, crack reporter, now absent on military leave. It gave Penny a tight feeling to see the covered typewriter, for she and Jerry had shared many grand times together.

She went quickly on, past a long row of desks where other reporters tapped out their stories. She nodded to Mr. DeWitt, the city editor, waved at Salt Sommers, photographer, and entered her father's private office.

"Hello, Dad," she greeted him cheerfully. "Busy?"

"I was."

Anthony Parker put aside the mouthpiece of a dictaphone machine to smile fondly at his one and only child. He was a tall, lean man and a recent illness had left him even thinner than before.

Penny sank into an upholstered chair in front of her father's desk.

"If it's money you want," began Mr. Parker, "the answer is no! Not one cent until your allowance is due. And no sob story please."

"Why, Dad." Penny shot him an injured look. "I wasn't even thinking of money—at least not such a trivial amount as exchanges hands on my allowance day. Nothing less than five hundred dollars interests me."

"Five hundred dollars!"

"Oh, I aim to earn it myself," Penny assured him hastily.

"How may I ask?"

"Maybe by catching a Headless Horseman," Penny grinned mischievously. "It seems that one is galloping wild out Red Valley way."

"Red Valley? Never heard of the place." Mr. Parker began to show irritation. "Penny, what are you talking about anyway?"

"This," explained Penny, spreading the clipping on the desk. "An old fellow who looked like Rip Van Winkle gave it to me. Then he disappeared before I could ask any questions. What do you think, Dad?"

Mr. Parker read the advertisement at a glance. "Bunk!" he exploded. "Pure bunk!"

"But Dad," protested Penny hotly. "It was printed in the *Hobostein Weekly*."

"I don't care who published it or where. I still say, 'bunk!'"

"Wasn't that the same word you used not so long ago when I tried to tell you about a certain Witch Doll?" teased Penny. "I started off on what looked like a foolish chase, but I came back dragging one of the best news stories the *Star* ever published. Remember?"

"No chance you'll ever let me forget!"

"Dad, I have a hunch," Penny went on, ignoring the jibe. "There's a big story in this Headless Horseman business! I just feel it."

"I suppose you'd like to have me assign you the task of tracking down your Front Page gem?"

"Now you're talking my language!"

"Penny, can't you see it's only a joke?" Mr. Parker asked in exasperation. "The Headless Horseman of

Sleepy Hollow! That story was written years ago by a man named Washington Irving. Or didn't you know?"

"Oh, I've read the 'Legend of Sleepy Hollow,'" Penny retorted loftily. "I remember one of the characters was Ichabod Crane. He was chased by the Headless Horseman and nearly died of fright."

"A nice bit of fiction," commented Mr. Parker. He tapped the newspaper clipping. "And so is this. The best place for it is in the scrap basket."

"Oh, no, it isn't!" Penny leaped forward to rescue the precious clipping. Carefully she folded it into her purse. "Dad, I'm convinced Sleepy Hollow must be a real place. Why can't I go there to interview Mr. Burmaster?"

"Did you say Burmaster?"

"Yes, the person who offers the reward. He signed himself J. Burmaster."

"That name is rather familiar," Mr. Parker said thoughtfully. "Wonder if it could be John Burmaster, the millionaire? Probably not. But I recall that a man by that name built an estate called Sleepy Hollow somewhere in the hill country."

"There!" cried Penny triumphantly. "You see the story does have substance after all! May I make the trip?"

"How would you find Burmaster?"

"A big estate shouldn't be hard to locate. I can

trace him through the Hobostein Weekly. What do you say, Dad?"

"The matter is for Mrs. Weems to decide. Now scam out of here! I have work to do."

"Thanks for letting me go," laughed Penny, giving him a big hug. "Now about finances—but we'll discuss that angle later."

Blowing her father an airy kiss, she pranced out of the office.

Penny fairly trod on clouds as she raced toward the home of her chum, Louise Sidell. Her dark-haired chum sat listlessly on the porch reading a book, but she jumped to her feet as she saw her friend. From the way Penny took the steps at one leap she knew there was important news to divulge.

"What's up?" she demanded alertly.

"Hop, skip and count three!" laughed Penny. "We're about to launch forth into a grand and glorious adventure. How would you like to go in search of a Headless Horseman?"

"Any kind of a creature suits me," chuckled Louise. "When do we start and where?"

"Lead me to a map and I'll try to answer your questions. Our first problem is to find a place called Red Valley."

For a half hour the two girls poured over a state map. Hobostein County was an area close by, while Red Valley proved to be an isolated little locality less

than a day's journey from Riverview. Penny was further encouraged to learn that the valley she proposed to visit had been settled by Dutch pioneers and that many of the original families still had descendants living there.

"It will be an interesting trip even if we don't run into any mystery," Louise said philosophically. "Are you sure you can go, Penny?"

"Well, pretty sure. Dad said it was up to Mrs. Weems to decide."

Louise gave her chum a sideways glance. "That seems like a mighty big 'if' to me."

"Oh, I'll bring her around somehow. Pack your suitcase, Lou. We'll start tomorrow morning bright and early."

Though Penny spoke with confidence, she was less certain of her powers as she entered her own home a few minutes later. She found Mrs. Weems, the stout, middle-aged housekeeper in the kitchen making cookies.

"Now please don't gobble any of that raw dough!" Mrs. Weems remonstrated as the girl reached for one of the freshly cut circles. "Can't you wait until they're baked?"

Penny perched herself on the sink counter. Reminded that her heels were making marks on the cabinet door, she drew them up beneath her and balanced like an acrobat. Forthwith she launched into a glow-

ing tale of her morning's activities. The story failed to bring a responsive warmth from the housekeeper.

"I declare, I can't make sense out of what you're saying!" she protested. "Headless Horsemen, my word! I'm afraid you're the one who's lost your head. The ideas you do get!"

Mrs. Weems sadly heaved a deep sigh. Since the death of Mrs. Parker many years before, she had assumed complete charge of the household. However, the task of raising Penny had been almost too much for the patient woman. Though she loved the girl as her own, there were times when she felt that running a three-ring circus would be much easier.

"Louise and I plan to start for Red Valley by train early tomorrow," said Penny briskly. "We'll probably catch the 9:25 if I can get up in time."

"And has your father said you may go?"

"He said it was up to you."

Mrs. Weems smiled grimly. "Then the matter is settled. I shall put my foot down."

"Oh, Mrs. Weems," Penny wailed. "Please don't ruin all our plans. The trip means so much to me!"

"I've heard that argument before," replied Mrs. Weems, unmoved. "I see no reason why I should allow you to start off on such a wild chase."

"But I expect to get a dandy story for Dad's paper!"

"That's only an excuse," sighed the housekeeper. "The truth is that you crave adventure and excite-

ment. It's a trait which unfortunately you inherited from your father."

Penny decided to play her trump card.

"Mrs. Weems, Red Valley is one of those picturesque hidden localities where families have gone on for generation after generation. The place must fairly swim with antiques. Wouldn't you like to have me buy a few for you while I'm there?"

Despite her intentions, Mrs. Weems displayed interest. As Penny very well knew, collecting antiques had become an absorbing hobby with her.

"Silas Malcom has a spinning wheel for sale," Penny went on, pressing home the advantage she had gained. "I'll find him if I can and buy it for you."

"Your schemes are as transparent as glass."

"But you will let me go?"

"I probably will," sighed Mrs. Weems. "I've learned to my sorrow that in any event you usually get your way."

Penny danced out of the kitchen to a telephone.

"It's all set," she gleefully told Louise. "We leave early tomorrow morning for Red Valley. And if I don't earn that five hundred dollar reward then my name isn't Penny Gumshoe Parker!"

INTO THE VALLEY

THE SLOW train crept around a bend and puffed to a standstill at the drowsing little station of Hobenstein. Louise and Penny, their linen suits mussed from many weary hours of sitting, were the only passengers to alight.

"Yesterday it seemed like a good idea," sighed Louise. "But now, I'm not so sure."

Penny stepped aside to avoid a dolly-truck which was being pushed down the deserted platform by a station attendant. She too felt ill at ease in this strange town and the task she had set for herself suddenly seemed a silly one. But not for anything in the world would she make such an admission.

"First we'll find the newspaper office," she said briskly. "This town is so small it can't be far away."

They carried their over-night bags into the stuffy little station. The agent, in shirt sleeves and green eye shade, speared a train order on the spindle and then glanced curiously at the girls.

"Anything I can do for you?"

"Yes," replied Penny. "Please tell us how to find the offices of the Hobenstein Weekly."

"It's just a piece down the street," directed the agent. "Go past the old town pump, and the livery stable. A red brick building. Best one in town. You can't miss it."

Penny and Louise took their bags and crossed to the shady side of the street. A horse and carriage had been tied to a hitching post and by contrast an expensive, new automobile was parked beside it. The unpaved road was thick with dust; the broken sidewalk was coated with it, as were the little plots of struggling grass.

In the entire town few persons were abroad. An old lady in a sunbonnet busily loaded boxes of groceries into a farm wagon. The only other sign of activity was at the livery stable where a group of men slouched on the street benches.

"Must we pass there?" Louise murmured. "Those men are staring as if they never saw a girl before."

"Let them," said Penny, undisturbed.

Two doors beyond the livery stable stood a newly built red brick building. In gold paint on the expanse of unwashed plate glass window were the words: "Hobenstein Weekly."

With heads high the girls ran the gantlet of loungers and reached the newspaper office. Through the

plate glass they glimpsed a large, cluttered room where desks, bins of type, table forms and a massive flat-bed press all seemed jammed together. A rotund man they took to be the editor was talking to a customer in a loud voice. Neither took the slightest notice of the girls as they pushed open the door.

"I don't care who you are or how much money you have," the editor was saying heatedly. "I run my paper as I please—see! If you don't like my editorials you don't have to read them."

"You're a pin-headed, stubborn Dutchman!" the other man retorted. "It makes no difference to me what you run in your stupid old weekly, providing you don't deliberately try to stir up the people of this valley."

"Worrying about your pocketbook?"

"I'm the largest tax payer in the valley. If there's an assessment for repairs on the Huntley Lake Dam it will cost me thousands of dollars."

"And if you had an ounce of sense, you'd see that without the repairs your property may not be worth a nickel! If these rains keep up, the dam's apt to give way, and your property would go in the twinkling of an eye. Not that I'm worried about your property. But I am concerned about the folks who are still living in the valley."

"Schultz, you're a calamity-howler!" the other accused. "There's no danger of the dam giving way

and you know it. By writing these hot editorials you're just trying to stir up public feeling—you're hoping to shake me down so I'll underwrite a costly and unnecessary repair bill."

The editor pushed back his chair and arose. His voice remained controlled but his eyes snapped like fire brands.

"Get out of this office!" he ordered. "The Hobenstein Weekly can do without your subscription. You've been a pain to this community ever since you came. Good afternoon!"

"You can't talk like that to me, Byron Schultz!" the other man began hotly. Then his gaze fell upon Louise and Penny who stood just inside the door. Jamming on his hat, he went angrily from the building.

The editor crumpled a sheet of paper and hurled it into a waste basket. The act seemed to restore his good humor, for with a wry grin he then turned toward the girls.

"Yes?" he inquired.

Penny scarcely knew how to begin. Sliding into a chair beside the editor's desk, she fumbled in her purse for the advertisement clipped from the Hobenstein Weekly. To her confusion she could not find it.

"Lose something?" the editor inquired kindly. "That's my trouble too. Last week we misplaced the copy for Gregg's Grocery Store and was Jake hoppin'

mad! Found it again just before the Weekly went to press."

"Here it is!" said Penny triumphantly. She placed the clipping on Mr. Schultz' desk.

"Haven't I had enough of that man in one day!" the editor snorted. "The old skinflint never paid me for the ad either!"

"Who is J. Burmaster?" Penny inquired eagerly.

"Who is he?" The editor's gray-blue eyes sent out little flashes of fire. "He's the most egotistical, thick-headed, muddle-brained property owner in this community."

"Not the man who was just here?"

"Yes, that was John Burmaster."

"Then he lives in Hobostein?"

"He does not," said the editor with emphasis. "It's bad enough having him seven miles away. You don't mean to tell me you haven't seen Sleepy Hollow estate?"

Penny shook her head. She explained that as strangers to the town, she and Louise had made no trips or inquiries.

"Sleepy Hollow is quite a show place," the editor went on grudgingly. "Old Burmaster built it about a year ago. Imported an architect and workmen from the city. The house has a long bridge leading up to it, and is supposed to be like the Sleepy Hollow of legend. Only the legend kinda backfired."

"You're speaking about the Headless Horseman?" Penny leaned forward in her chair.

"When Burmaster built his house, the old skinflint didn't calculate on getting a haunt to go with it," the editor chuckled. "Served him right for being so muleish."

"But what is the story of the Headless Horseman?" Penny asked. "Has Mr. Burmaster actually offered a five hundred dollar reward for its capture?"

"He'd give double the amount to get that Horseman off his neck!" chuckled the editor. "But folks up Delta way aren't so dumb. The reward never will be collected."

"Is Delta the name of a town?"

"Yes, it's up the valley a piece," explained Mr. Schultz. "You don't seem very familiar with our layout here."

"No, my friend and I come from Riverview."

"Well, you see, it's like this." The editor drew a crude map for the girls. "Sleepy Hollow estate is situated in a sort of 'V' shaped valley. Just below it is the little town of Delta, and on below that, a hamlet called Raven. We're at the foot of the valley, so to speak. Huntley Lake and the dam are just above Sleepy Hollow estate."

"And is there really danger that the dam will give way?"

"If you want my opinion, read the Hobostein

Weekly," answered the editor. "The dam won't wash out tomorrow or the next day, but if these rains keep on, the whole valley's in danger. But try to pound any sense into Burmaster's thick head!"

"You started to tell me about the Headless Horseman," Penny reminded him.

"Did I now?" smiled the editor. "Don't recollect it myself. Fact is, Burmaster's ghost troubles don't interest me one whit."

"But we've come all the way from Riverview just to find out about the Headless Horseman."

"Calculate on earning that reward?" The editor's eyes twinkled.

"Perhaps."

"Then you don't want to waste time trying to get second-hand information. Burmaster's the man for you to see. Talk to him."

"Well—"

"No, you talk to Burmaster," the editor said with finality. "Only don't tell him I sent you."

"But how will we find the man?" Penny was rather dismayed to have the interview end before it was well launched.

"Oh, his car is parked down the street," the editor answered carelessly. "Everyone in town knows Burmaster. I'd talk to you longer only I'm so busy this afternoon. Burmaster is the one to tell you his own troubles."

Thus dismissed, the girls could do nothing but thank the editor and leave the newspaper building. Dubiously they looked up and down the street. The fine new car they had noticed a little while earlier no longer was parked at the curb. Nor was there any sign of the man who had just left the newspaper office.

"All we can do is inquire for him," said Penny.

At a grocery store farther down the street they paused to ask if Mr. Burmaster had been seen. The store keeper finished grinding a pound of coffee for a customer and then answered Penny's question.

"Mr. Burmaster?" he repeated. "Why, yes, he was in town, but he pulled out about five minutes ago."

"Then we've just missed him!" Penny exclaimed.

"Burmaster's on his way to Sleepy Hollow by this time," the store keeper agreed. "You might catch him there."

"But how can we get to Sleepy Hollow?"

"Well, there's a train. Only runs once a day though. And it went through about half an hour ago."

"That was the train we came in on. Isn't there a car one can hire?"

"Don't know of any. Clem Williams has some good horses though. He keeps the livery stable down the street."

Their faces very long, the girls picked up their overnight bags and went outside again.

"I knew this trip would be a wash-out," said Louise disconsolately. "Here we are, stuck high and dry until our train comes in tomorrow."

"But why give up so easily?"

"We're licked, that's why. We've missed Mr. Burmaster and we can't go to Sleepy Hollow after him."

Penny gazed thoughtfully down the street at Clem Williams' livery stable.

"Why can't we go to Sleepy Hollow?" she demanded. "Let's rent horses."

Louise waxed sarcastic. "To be sure. We can canter along balancing these overnight bags on the pommel of our saddles!"

"We'll have to leave our luggage behind," Penny planned briskly. "The most essential things we can wrap up in knapsacks."

"But I'm not a good rider," Louise complained. "The last time we rode a mile I couldn't walk for a week."

"Seven miles isn't so far."

"Seven miles!" Louise gasped. "Why, it's slaughter."

"Oh, you'll last," chuckled Penny confidently. "I'll see to that."

"I am curious to see Sleepy Hollow estate," Louise

admitted with reluctance. "All that talk about the Huntley Dam interested me too."

"And the Headless Horseman?"

"That part rather worries me. Penny, do you realize that if we go to Sleepy Hollow we may run into more than we bargain for?"

Penny laughed and grasping her chums arm, pulled her down the street.

"That's what I hope," she confessed. "Unless Sleepy Hollow lets us down shamefully, our adventure is just starting!"

A STRANGER OF THE ROAD

EVEN FOR late September it was a warm day. The horses plodded slowly up a steep, winding trail heavily canopied with yellowing maple leaves. Louise and Penny swished angrily at the buzzing mosquitoes and tried to urge their tired mounts to a faster pace.

"I warned you this trip would be slaughter," Louise complained, ducking to avoid a tree limb. "Furthermore, I suspect we're lost."

"How could we be when we haven't turned off the trail?" Penny called over her shoulder.

She rode ahead on a sorry looking nag appropriately named Bones. The animal was more easily managed than the skittish mare Louise had chosen at Williams' Livery Stable, but had an annoying appetite for foliage.

"Mr. Williams' directions were clear enough," Penny resumed. "He said to follow this trail until we reach a little town named Delta."

"Providing we survive that long," Louise inter-

posed crossly. "How far from Delta to Sleepy Hollow?"

"Not more than two or three miles. And once we get down out of these hills into the valley, the going should be much easier."

Penny spoke with forced cheerfulness. In truth, she too had wearied of the trip which in the last hour had become sheer torture instead of adventure. Her freckled face was blotched with mosquito bites. Every hairpin had been jolted from her head and muscles fairly screamed a protest. Louise, on an unruly horse, had taken even more punishment.

Penny gave Bones a dig in the ribs. The horse quickened his step, weaving a corkscrew path around the trunks of the giant trees.

Gradually the tangle of brush and trees began to thin out. They came at last to a clearing at the brow of the hill. Penny drew rein beside a huge, moss-covered rock. Below stretched a beautiful rich, green valley through which wound a flood-swollen river. From the chimney-tops of a cluster of houses smoke curled lazily, blending into the blue rim of the distant hills.

"Did you ever see a prettier little valley?" Penny asked, her interest reviving. "That must be Delta down there."

Louise was too weary to look or answer. She slid out of the saddle and tossed the reins over a tree limb.

Near by a spring gushed from between the rocks. She walked stiffly to it and drank deeply of the cool water.

"Lou, the valley looks exactly as I hoped it would!" Penny went on eagerly. "It has a dreamy, drowsy atmosphere, just as Irving described the Sleepy Hollow of legend!"

Louise bent to drink of the spring again. She sponged her hot face with a dampened handkerchief. Pulling off shoes and stockings, she let the cool water trickle over her bare feet.

"According to legend, the valley and its inhabitants were bewitched," Penny rambled on. "Why, the Indians considered these hills as the abode of Spirits. Sometimes the Spirits took mischievous delight in wreaking trouble upon the villagers—"

Penny's voice trailed off. From far down the hillside came the faint thud of hoofbeats. The girl's attention became fixed upon a moving horseman on the road below.

"Now what?" inquired Louise impatiently. "Don't try to tell me you've seen the Headless Horseman already?"

"I've certainly seen a horseman! My, can that fellow ride!"

Louise picked up her shoes and hobbled over the stones to the trail's end. Through a gap in the trees she gazed down upon a winding turnpike fringed on

either side with an old-fashioned rail fence. A horseman, mounted on a roan mare, rode bareback at a full run. As the girls watched in admiration, the mare took the low fence in one magnificent leap and crashed out of sight through the trees.

"You're right, Penny," Louise acknowledged. "What wouldn't I give to be able to ride like that! One of the villagers, I suppose."

The hoofbeats rapidly died away. Louise turned wearily around, intending to remount her horse. She stared in astonishment. Where the mare had grazed, there now was only trampled grass.

"Where's my horse?" she demanded. "Where's White Foot?"

"Spirited away by the witches maybe."

"This is no time for any of your feeble jokes, Penny Parker! That stupid horse must have wandered off while I was admiring your old valley and that rider!"

Penny remained undisturbed. "Oh, we'll find the mare all right," she said confidently. "She can't be far away."

The girls thought that they heard a crashing of underbrush to the left of the trail. Investigation did not disclose that the horse had gone that way. They could hear no hoofbeats, nor was any of the grass trampled.

"I'll bet White Foot's on her way back to Williams' Stable by this time," Louise declared crossly. "Such

luck!" She sat down on a stone and put on her shoes and stockings.

"We didn't hear the horse run off, Lou. She can't be far."

"Then you find her. I've had all I can stand. I'm tired and I'm hungry and I wish I'd never come on this wild, silly chase." Tears began to trickle down Louise's heat-mottled face.

Penny slid down from Bones and patted her chum's arm awkwardly. Louise pulled away from her.

"Now don't give me any pep talk or I'll simply bawl," she warned. "What am I going to do without a horse?"

"Why, that's easy, Lou. We'll ride double."

"Back to Williams' Stable?"

"Well, not tonight. It's getting late and after coming this far it would be foolish to turn around and start right back."

"It would be the most sensible act of our lives," Louise retorted. "But then I might know you'd insist on pushing on. You and Christopher Columbus have a lot in common!"

"We came to find out about that Headless Horseman, didn't we?"

"You did, I guess," Louise sighed, getting up from the rock. "I just came along because I'm weak minded! Well, what's the plan?"

"Let's ride down to Delta and try to get a room for the night."

Louise's silence gave consent. She climbed up behind Penny on Bones and they jogged down the trail toward the turnpike.

"It's queer how White Foot sneaked away without making a sound," Penny presently commented. "According to the old legend strange things did happen in the Sleepy Hollow valley. The Spirit was supposed to wreak all sorts of vexations upon the inhabitants. Sometimes he would take the shape of a bear or a deer and lead bewildered hunters a merry chase through the woods."

"You're the one who is bewitched," Louise broke in. "And if you ask me, you've been that way ever since you were born. There's a little spark—something deep within you that keeps saying: 'Go on, Penny. Sic 'em, Penny! Maybe you'll find a mystery!'"

"Perhaps I shall too!"

"Oh, I don't doubt that. You've turned up some dandy news stories for your father's paper. But this is different."

"How so?"

"In the first place we both know there's no such thing as a Headless Horseman. It must all be a joke."

"Would you call that advertisement in the Hobo-stein paper a joke?"

"It could have been. We don't know many of the facts."

"That's why we're here." Penny guided Bones onto the wide turnpike. Before she could add more, Louise's grasp about her waist suddenly tightened.

"Listen, Penny! Someone's coming!"

Penny drew rein. Distinctly, both girls could hear the clop-clop of approaching hoofbeats. Their hope that it might be White Foot was quickly dashed. A moment later the same horseman they had observed a few minutes earlier, swung around the bend.

The young man rapidly overtook the girls. From the way he grinned, they suspected that they presented a ridiculous sight as they rocked along on Bones' swaying back. He sat his own horse, a handsome roan, with easy grace.

Louise tugged at her skirt which kept creeping above her knees. "He's laughing at us!" she muttered under her breath.

The rider cantered up, then deliberately slowed his horse to a walk. Louise stole a quick sideways glance. The young man was dark-haired, about twenty-six and very good looking. His flashing brown eyes were friendly and so was his voice as he spoke a cheery, "Lo, girls."

"Hello," Penny responded briefly. Louise immediately nudged her in the ribs, a silent warning that she considered the stranger "fresh."

Nevertheless, Penny twisted sideways in the saddle the better to look at their road companion. He wore whipcord riding breeches and highly polished boots. From the well-tailored cut of his clothes she decided that he too was a comparative stranger to the hill country.

"Not looking for a horse by any chance, are you?" the young man inquired.

Louise's snub nose came down out of the sky. "Oh, we are!" she cried. "Where did you see her?"

"A mare with a white foot? Her left hind one?"

"Yes, that's White Foot!" Louise exclaimed joyfully. "The stupid creature wandered off."

"Saw her making for the valley about five minutes ago. Like enough she turned in at Silas Malcom's place."

The name took Penny by surprise. Although she had hoped to find the old man who had visited the *Star* office, she had not thought it possible without a long search.

"Does Mr. Malcom live near here?" she inquired.

"Yes, his farm's on down the pike. Want me to ride along and show you the way?"

Under the circumstance, Penny and Louise had no choice but to accept the offer. However, they both thought that the young man merely was making an excuse to accompany them. He seemed to read their minds for he said:

"I didn't actually see your missing horse turn in at the Malcom place. Know why I think she'll be there?"

"Perhaps you have supernatural powers," Penny said lightly. "From what we hear, this valley is quite a place for witches and Headless Horsemen."

The young man gave her an amused glance.

"The explanation is quite simple," he laughed. "Silas used to own that horse. All horses have a strong homing instinct, you know."

"I've noticed that," Louise contributed a bit grimly.

"Guess I should introduce myself," the young man resumed. "Name's Joe Quigley. I'm the station agent at Delta."

"We're glad to meet you," Penny responded. Though Louise scowled at her, she gave their own names. She added that they had come to the valley seeking information about the mysterious Headless Horseman.

"Friends of Mr. Burmaster?" Quigley inquired casually.

"Oh, no," Penny assured him. "We just came for the fun of it. Is it true that some prankster has been causing trouble in the valley?"

"Prankster?"

"Yes, someone fixed up to resemble the Headless Horseman of fable."

Quigley grinned broadly. "Well, now, you

couldn't prove it by me. Some folks say that on certain foggy nights the old Galloping Hessian does ride down out of the hills. But then there are folks who claim their butter won't churn because it's been bewitched. I never put much stock in such talk myself."

"Then you've never actually seen such a rider?"

Joe Quigley remained silent. After a thoughtful interval he admitted: "Well, one night over a month ago, I did see something strange."

"What was it?" Louise asked quickly.

Quigley pointed far up the hillside. "See that big boulder? Witching Rock it's called."

Penny nodded. "We were there only a few minutes ago."

"At night fog rises up from the valley and gives the place a spooky look. Years ago a tramp was killed there. No one ever did learn the how or why of it."

"What was it you saw?" Penny inquired.

"Can't rightly say," Quigley returned soberly. "I was on this same turnpike when I chanced to glance up toward that big rock. I saw something there in the mist and then the next minute it was gone."

"Not the Headless Horseman?" Penny asked.

"Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't. I'd have thought I imagined it only I heard clattering hoofbeats. But I can tell you one thing about this valley."

"What's that?" asked Louise.

"All the inhabitants are said to be bewitched! That's why I act so crazy myself."

Penny tossed her head. "Oh, you're just laughing at us," she accused. "I suppose it does sound silly to say we came here searching for a Headless Horseman."

"No, it's not in the least silly," Quigley corrected. "I might pay you a compliment by saying you impress me as very courageous young ladies. May I offer a word of advice?"

"Thank you, I don't think we care for it."

"Nevertheless, I aim to give it anyway." Quigley grinned down at Penny. "You see, I know who you are. You're Anthony Parker's daughter, and you've built up a reputation for solving mysteries."

Penny was astonished for she had not mentioned her father's name.

"Never mind how I knew," said Quigley, forestalling questions. "Here's my tip. No one ever will collect Burmaster's reward offer. So don't waste time and energy trailing a phantom."

"Why do you say the reward never will be collected?"

Quigley would not answer. With a provoking shake of his head, he pointed down the pike to an unpainted cabin and a huge new barn.

"That's the Malcom place," he said. "If I'm not

mistaken your missing horse is grazing by the gate. Goodbye and good luck."

With a friendly, half-mocking salute, he wheeled his mount. The next instant horse and rider had crashed through a gap in the roadside brush and were lost to view.

CHAPTER

5

SLEEPY HOLLOW ESTATE

"I'M AFRAID that young man was having fun at our expense," Penny remarked after horse and rider had gone. "How do you suppose he knew about my father?"

"Read it in a newspaper probably. You've both made the headlines often enough." Louise sighed wearily and shifted positions. "I certainly wish we never had come here."

"Well, I don't," Penny said with emphasis. She clucked to Bones and when he failed to move smartly along, gave him a quick jab with her heels. "If Joe Quigley won't tell us about that galloping ghost, perhaps Mr. Malcom will."

"I'll settle for my missing horse," Louise responded.

The girls jogged on down the road toward the Malcom cabin. Already the hills were casting long blue shadows over the valley floor. With night fast ap-

proaching Penny began to wonder where they could seek lodging.

"You don't catch me staying at the Malcom place," Louise said, reading her chum's thought. "It's too ramshackle."

Drawing nearer the cabin, both girls were elated to see White Foot grazing contentedly in a stony field adjoining the Malcom barn yard. At the gate Penny alighted nimbly and threw it open so that Louise could ride through.

The creaking of the rusty hinges brought Silas Malcom from the tumble-down house. He stared blankly for a moment and then recognized Penny.

"Well, bless my heart," he said. "If it ain't the young lady that helped me at the newspaper office!"

"And now it's your turn to help us," laughed Penny. "We've lost our horse."

"I knowed somebody would be along for her purty soon," the old man chuckled. "She run into the barn yard 'bout ten minutes ago an' I turned her out to graze. I'll git her for you."

If Mr. Malcom was surprised to see Penny so far from Riverview he did not disclose it. He asked no questions. Hobbling to the fence, he whistled a shrill blast. White Foot pricked up her ears and then came trotting over to nuzzle the old man's hand.

"You certainly have that horse under control," said

Penny admiringly. "I guess it's all in the way you handle 'em."

"It's also all in the way you handle a Flying Fortress or a stick of dynamite," Louise cut in. "You may have my share of horses!"

"White Foot didn't throw you off?" Mr. Malcom inquired.

"Oh, no," Louise assured him, and explained how the horse had run away.

Old Silas chuckled appreciatively. "White Foot always did have a habit o' sneakin' off like that. Raised her from a colt, but sold her to Williams down in Hobostein when I got short o' cash."

Wrapping the reins about a hitching post, the old man allowed his gaze to wander toward the valley. With a gesture that was hard to interpret, he indicated the long stretch of fertile pasture land, golden grain fields and orderly rows of young orchard trees.

"See that!" he commanded.

"It's a beautiful valley," Louise murmured politely.

"It's mor'n that," corrected the old man. "You're lookin' at one o' the richest parcels o' land in this here state. Me and the old woman lived down there fer goin' on twenty years. Then we was put out o' our cabin. Now that penny-pinchin' Burmaster owns every acre fer as you can see—not countin' the village o' Delta an' three acres held fer spite by the Widder Lear."

Old Silas took a chew of tobacco and pointed to a trim little log cabin visible through a gap in the trees.

"Stands out like a sore thumb, don't it? Burmaster's done everything he can to git rid o' that place, but the Widder Lear jes' sits tight an' won't have no dealings with him. Says that if the old skin-flint comes round her place again she's goin' to drive him off with a shotgun."

Penny and Louise waited, hoping that the old man would tell more. After a little silence, he resumed meditatively:

"The Widder was the smartest o' the lot of us. From the first she said Burmaster was out to gobble up all the best land for hisself. Nobody could get her to sign no papers. That's why she's got her little place today and the rest of us is tryin' to make a livin' out o' these stone patches."

"Burmaster forced all of the valley folk off their land?" Penny inquired, perplexed. "How could he do that?"

"Some of 'em sold out to him," Old Silas admitted. "But mostly the land was owned by a rich feller in Boston. He never paid no attention to his holdings 'cept to collect a bit o' rent now and then. But last spring he up and sold out to Burmaster, and we was all told to git off the land."

Penny nodded thoughtfully. "I suppose that was entirely legal. If Mr. Burmaster bought and paid for

the land one couldn't accuse him of dishonest dealings."

"I ain't accusin' nobody o' nothin'," Old Silas replied. "I'm jes' tellin' you how things are in this here valley. Ye came to find out about that Headless Horseman, didn't ye?"

"Well, yes, we did," Penny acknowledged.

"Figured you would. You'll never win that reward Burmaster's offerin', but you could do a heap o' good in this here valley."

"How?" asked Penny, even more puzzled.

"You got a pa that runs a big city newspaper. When he prints an editorial piece in that paper o' his, folks read it and pay attention."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"You will after you been here awhile," the old man chuckled. "Where you gals calculatin' to spend the night?"

"I wish we knew."

"Me and the ole woman'd be glad to take you in, only we ain't got no room fitten for city-raised gals. The Widder Lear'll be glad to give you bed and fodder."

The girls thanked Mr. Malcom, though secretly they were sure they would keep on until they reached Delta. A suspicion was growing in Penny's mind that she had not come to the valley of her own free will. Rather she had been lured there by Old Silas' Head-

less Horseman tale. She had assumed the old fellow to be a simple, trusting hillman, while in truth he meant to make use of her.

"Calculate you're anxious-like to git down to the valley 'fore night sets on," the old man resumed. "The turnpike's no fitten place for a gal after dark."

"You think we might meet the Headless Horseman?" Penny asked, smiling.

Old Silas deliberately allowed the question to pass.

"Jes' follow the turnpike," he instructed. "You'll come fust to the Burmaster place. Then on beyond is the Widder Lear's cabin. She'll treat you right."

Penny had intended to ask Old Silas if he still had a spinning wheel for sale. However, a glimpse of the darkening sky warned her there was no time to waste. She and Louise must hasten on unless they expected to be overtaken by night.

"Goodbye," Penny said, vaulting into the saddle. "We'll probably see you again before we leave the valley."

"Calculate you will," agreed Old Silas. As he opened the gate for the girls he smiled in a way they could not fathom.

Once more on the curving turnpike, Penny and Louise discussed the old man's strange words. Both were agreed that Silas had not been in the least surprised to see them.

"But why did he say I could do good in the valley?"

Penny speculated. "Evidently he thinks I'll influence my father to write something in the *Star*."

"Against Burmaster perhaps," nodded Louise.

"Everyone we've met seems to dislike that man."

The girls clattered over a little log bridge and rounded a bend. Giant trees arched their limbs over the pike, creating a dark, cool tunnel. Penny and Louise urged their tired horses to a faster pace. Though neither would have admitted it, they had no desire to be on the turnpike after nightfall.

"Listen!" Louise commanded suddenly. "What was that sound?"

Penny drew rein to listen. Only a chirp of a cricket disturbed the eerie stillness.

"Just for a minute I thought I heard hoofbeats," Louise said apologetically. "Guess I must have imagined it."

Emerging from the long avenue of trees, the girls were slightly dismayed to see how swiftly darkness had spread its cloak on the valley. Beyond the next turn of the corkscrew road stood a giant tulip tree. Riding beneath it, Penny stared up at the gnarled limbs which were twisted in fantastic shapes.

"There was an old tulip tree in the Legend of Sleepy Hollow," she murmured in awe. "And it was close by that the Headless Horseman appeared—"

"Will you please hush?" Louise interrupted. "I'm jittery enough without any build-up from you!"

Some distance ahead stretched a long, narrow

bridge with a high wooden railing. By straining their eyes the girls could see that it crossed a mill pond and led in a graceful curve to a rambling manor house of clapboard and stone.

"Mr. Burmaster's estate!" Louise exclaimed.

"And it looks exactly as I imagined it would!"

Penny added in delight. "A perfect setting for the Galloping Hessian!"

"Too spooky if you ask me," said Louise with a shiver. "Why would anyone build an expensive home in such a lonely place?"

The girls rode on. A group of oaks, heavily matted with wild grapevines, threw a deeper gloom over the road. For a short distance the dense growth of trees hid the estate from view.

Suddenly the girls were startled to hear the sharp, ringing clop-clop of steel-shod hoofs. Unmistakably, the sound came from the direction of the long, narrow bridge.

"There! I knew I heard hoofbeats a moment ago!" Louise whispered nervously. "Maybe it is the Headless Horseman!"

"Be your age!" chided Penny. "We both know there's no such thing—"

The words died on her lips. From somewhere in the darkness ahead came a woman's terrified scream. Frightened by the sound, Bones gave a startled snort. With a jerk which nearly flung Penny from the saddle, he plunged on toward the bridge.

GHOSTS AND WITCHES

HIS EARS laid back, Bones plunged headlong toward the gloom-shrouded bridge. Pins shook from Penny's head, and her hair became a stream of gold in the wind. She hunched low in the saddle, but could not stop the horse though she pulled hard on the reins.

As she reached a dense growth of elder bushes, a man leaped out to grasp the bridle. Bones snorted angrily and pounded the earth with his hoofs.

"Oh, thank you!" Penny gasped, and then she realized that the man had not meant to help her.

"So you're the one who's been causing so much trouble here!" he exclaimed wrathfully. "Get down out of that saddle!"

"I'll do no such thing!" Penny retorted. She tried to push him away.

Louise came trotting up on White Foot. Her unexpected arrival seemed to disconcert the man for he released Bones' bridle.

"What's he trying to do?" Louise demanded sharply, pulling up beside her chum.

Before Penny could find tongue, another man, heavily built, came running across the narrow bridge. His bald head bore no covering and the long tails of his well-cut coat flapped wildly in the wind.

"You let that rider get away, Jennings!" he cried accusingly to the workman. "Did you see him ride across the bridge and then take a trail along the creek bed?"

"No, I didn't, Mr. Burmaster," the workman mumbled. "I heard hoofbeats and came as fast as I could from the grist mill. The only rider I saw was this girl. There's two of 'em."

"We have a perfect right to be here," Penny declared. "We were riding along the pike when we heard hoofbeats, then a scream. My horse became frightened and plunged down this way toward the bridge."

"I'm sorry I grabbed the bridle, Miss," the workman apologized. "You see, I thought—"

"Your trouble, Jennings, is that you never think!" cut in the owner of Sleepy Hollow curtly. "You never even saw the rider who got away?"

"No, sir. But I'll get the other workmen and go after him."

"Don't waste your efforts. He was only a boy—not the man we're after."

"Only a boy, sir?"

"The scamp clattered a stick against the railing of the bridge just to frighten my wife. Mrs. Burmaster is a very nervous woman."

"Yes, sir," replied the workman rather emphatically. "I know, sir."

"Oh, you do?" Mr. Burmaster asked, his tone unfriendly. "Well, get to the house and tell her there's no cause to scream to high heaven. The boy, whoever he was, is gone."

"I'll tell her," the workman mumbled, starting away.

"And mind, next time I order you to watch this road, I mean watch it!" the estate owner called after him. "If you don't, I'll find another man to take your place."

As Mr. Burmaster turned toward the girls, they obtained a better view of his face. He wore glasses and his cheeks were pouchy; a hooked nose curved down toward a mouth that was hard and firm. Yet when he spoke it was with a surprisingly pleasant tone of voice.

"I must apologize for the stupid actions of my workman," he said to Penny. "He should have known that you were not the one we are after."

"Not the Headless Horseman?" Penny asked, half jokingly.

Mr. Burmaster stepped closer so that he could gaze up into the girl's face. He scrutinized it for a moment, and then without answering her question said: "You are a stranger to the valley."

"Yes, we are."

"Then may I ask how you knew about our difficulties here at Sleepy Hollow?"

Penny explained that she had seen the estate owner's advertisement in the *Hobosteim Weekly*. She did not add that it was the real reason why she and Louise had made the long trip from Riverview.

"I'll be willing to pay any amount to be rid of that so-called ghost who annoys us here at Sleepy Hollow," Mr. Burmaster said bitterly. "Night after night my wife has had no rest. The slightest sound terrifies her."

"Tell us more about the mysterious rider," Penny urged. "What time does he appear?"

"Oh, there's no predicting that. Often he rides over the bridge on stormy or foggy nights. Then again it's apt to be just after dusk. Tonight we thought we had the scamp, but it proved to be only a mischievous boy."

"Your workmen stand guard?"

"They have orders to watch this bridge day and night. But the men are a lazy lot. They wander off or they go to sleep."

"Isn't it possible that the disturbance always has been caused by a boy—perhaps this lad who clattered over the bridge tonight?"

"Impossible!" Mr. Burmaster snapped impatiently. "I've seen the Headless Horseman at least five times myself."

"You mean the rider actually has no head?" Louise interposed in awe.

"The appearance is that. Of course there's no question but someone from the village or the hills has been impersonating Irving's celebrated character of fiction. The point is, the joke's gone too far!"

"I should think so," Louise murmured sympathetically.

"My wife and I came to this little valley with only one thought. We wanted to build a fine home for ourselves amid peaceful surroundings. We brought in city workmen, a clever architect. No expense was spared to make this house and estate perfect. But when we tried to recreate the atmosphere of Sleepy Hollow, we didn't anticipate getting a ghost with it."

"When did the trouble first start?" Penny asked.

"Almost from the hour of our arrival. The country folks didn't like it because we imported city labor. They hindered our efforts. The women were abusive to my wife. Then last Halloween, the Headless Horseman clattered over this bridge."

"Couldn't it have been a holiday prank?"

"We thought so at first, but a month later, the same thing happened again. This time the scamp tossed a pebble against our bedroom window. Since then the rider has been coming at fairly frequent intervals."

"If you know it's a prank why should it worry you?" Penny inquired.

"A thing like that wears one down after awhile," the owner of the estate said wearily. "For myself I shouldn't mind, but my wife's going to pieces."

"Was it your wife we heard scream?" Louise asked, seeking to keep the conversational ball rolling.

"Yes, she's apt to go off the deep end whenever anyone rides fast over the bridge. My wife—"

Mr. Burmaster did not complete what he had intended to say. At that moment, a soft padding of footsteps was heard, a creaking of boards on the bridge. From the direction of the house came a tall, shadowy figure.

"What were you saying about me, John?" The voice was that of a woman, shrill and strident.

"My wife," murmured the estate owner. He turned toward her. "Matilda," he said gently, "these girls are strangers to the Valley—"

"You were complaining about me to them!" the woman accused. "Oh, you needn't deny it! I distinctly heard you! You're always saying things to hurt my feelings. You don't care how I suffer. Isn't it enough that I have to live in this horrible com-

munity, among such cruel hateful people without you turning against me too?"

"Please, Matilda—"

"Don't 'Matilda' me! Apologize at once."

"Why, certainly I apologize," Mr. Burmaster said soothingly. "I was only telling the girls how nervous it makes you when anyone rides at a fast pace over the bridge."

"And why shouldn't I be nervous?" the woman demanded. "Since we've come to this community, I've been subjected to every possible insult! I suppose you let that rider get away again?"

"He was only a mischievous boy."

"I don't care who he was!" the woman cried. "I want him caught and turned over to the authorities. I want everyone who rides over this bridge arrested!"

"This is a public highway, Matilda. When we built this footbridge over the brook we had to grant permission for pedestrians and horseback riders to pass."

"Then make them change the ruling! Aren't you the richest man in the Valley? Or doesn't that mean anything?"

Mr. Burmaster glanced apologetically at Penny and Louise. The girls, quite taken aback by the woman's tirade, felt rather sorry for him. It was plain to see that Mrs. Burmaster was not a well woman. Her

sharp, angular face was drawn as if from constant worry, and she kept patting nervously at the stiff rolls of her hair.

"Well, I guess we'd better be moving on," Penny said significantly to Louise.

"Yes, we must," her companion agreed with alacrity. "Mr. Burmaster, is Mrs. Lear's place on down this road?"

The owner of Sleepy Hollow was given no opportunity to answer. Before he could speak, his wife stepped closer, glaring up at Louise in the saddle.

"So you're friends of Mrs. Lear?" she demanded mockingly. "I suppose that old hag sent you here to snoop and pry and annoy me!"

"Goodness, no!" gasped Louise.

"We've never even seen the woman," Penny added. "Silas Malcom told us that Mrs. Lear might give us a room for the night."

"Silas Malcom!" Mrs. Burmaster seized upon the name. "He's another who tries to make trouble for us!"

"If you're in need of a place to stay, we'll be glad to have you remain with us," Mr. Burmaster invited. "We have plenty of room."

Mrs. Burmaster remained silent, but in the semi-darkness, the girls saw her give her husband a quick nudge. No need to be told that they were unwel-

come by the eccentric mistress of Sleepy Hollow.

"Thank you, we couldn't possibly stay," Penny said, gathering up the reins.

She and Louise walked their horses single file over the creaking bridge. Just as they reached the far end Mr. Burmaster called to them. Pulling up, they waited for him.

"Please don't mind my wife," he said in an undertone. "She doesn't mean half what she says."

"We understand," Penny assured him kindly.

"You said you were interested in the Headless Horseman," the estate owner went on hurriedly. "Well, my offer holds. I'll pay a liberal reward to anyone who can learn the identity of the prankster. It's no boy. I'm sure of that."

Penny replied that she and Louise would like to help if they knew how.

"We'll talk about that part later on," Mr. Burmaster said. He glanced quickly over his shoulder, observing that his wife was coming. "No chance now. You'll stay with Mrs. Lear tonight?"

"If she'll take us in."

"Oh, she will, though her place is an eye-sore. Now this is what you might do. Get the old lady to talking. If she should give you the slightest hint who the prankster is, seize upon it."

"Then you think Mrs. Lear knows?"

"I suspect half the community does!" Mr. Burmas-

ter answered bitterly. "Everyone except ourselves. We're hated here. No one will cooperate with us."

Penny thought over the request. She did not like the idea of going to Mrs. Lear's home to spy.

"Well, we'll see," she answered, without making a definite promise.

Mrs. Burmaster was coming across the bridge. Not wishing to talk to her, the girls bade the owner of Sleepy Hollow a hasty farewell and rode away. Once on the turnpike, they discussed the queer mistress of the estate.

"If you ask me, everyone in this community is queer," Louise grumbled. "Mrs. Burmaster just seems a bit more so than the others."

Intent upon reaching the Lear homestead, the saddle-weary girls kept on along the winding highway. It was impossible to make good time for White Foot kept giving Louise trouble. Presently the mare stopped dead in her tracks, then wheeled and started back toward the Burmaster estate. Louise, bouncing helplessly, shrieked to her chum for help.

"Rein her in!" Penny shouted.

When Louise seemed unable to obey, Penny rode Bones alongside and seized the reins. White Foot then stopped willingly enough.

"All I ask of life is to get off this creature!" Louise half sobbed. "I'm tired enough to die! And we've had nothing to eat since noon."

"Oh, brace up," Penny encouraged her. "It can't be much farther to Mrs. Lear's place. I'll lead your horse for awhile."

Seizing the reins again, she led White Foot down the road at a walk. They met no one on the lonely, twisting highway. The only sound other than the steady cllop of hoofbeats was an occasional guttural twang from a bullfrog.

The night grew darker. Louise began to shiver, though not so much from cold as nervousness. Her gaze constantly roved along the deep woods to the left of the road. Seeing something white and ghostly amid the trees, she called Penny's attention to it.

"Why, it's nothing," Penny scoffed. "Just an old tree trunk split by lightning. That streak of white is the inner wood showing."

A bend in the road lay just ahead. Rounding it, the girls saw what appeared to be a camp fire glowing in the distance. The wind carried a strong odor of wood smoke.

"Now what's that?" Louise asked uneasily. "Someone camping along the road?"

"I can see a house on ahead," Penny replied. "The bonfire seems to have been built in the yard."

Both girls were convinced that they were approaching the Lear place. The fire, however, puzzled them. And their wonderment grew as they rode closer.

In the glare of the leaping flames they saw a huge,

hanging iron kettle. A dark figure hovered over it, stirring the contents with a stick.

Involuntarily, Penny's hand tightened on the reins and Bones stopped. Louise pulled up so short that White Foot nearly reared back on her hind legs.

"A witch!" Penny exclaimed, half jubilantly. "I've always wanted to meet one, and this is our chance!"

BED AND BOARD

FOR A moment the two girls watched in awe the dark, grotesque figure silhouetted against the leaping flames of the fire. A woman in a long, flowing gown kept stirring the contents of the iron kettle.

"Doesn't she look exactly like a witch!" Penny exclaimed again. "Maybe it's Mrs. Lear."

"If that's the Lear place I know one thing!" Louise announced dramatically. "I'm going straight on to Delta."

Penny knew better than to argue with her chum. Softly she quoted from "Macbeth":

"Double, double, toil and trouble
Fire burn and cauldron bubble."

"Trouble is all we've had since we started this wild trip," Louise broke in. "And now you ask me to spend the night with a witch!"

"Not so loud, or the witch may hear you," Penny cautioned. "Don't be silly, Lou. It's only a woman out in her back yard cooking supper."

"At this time of night?"

"Well, it is a bit late, but so are we. Any port in a storm. Come along, Louise. I'll venture that whatever is cooking in that kettle will be good."

Penny rode on and Louise had no choice but to follow. A hundred yards farther on they came to an ancient farmhouse set back from the road. Dismounting, the girls tied their horses to an old-fashioned hitching rack near the sagging gate. A mailbox bore the name: Mrs. M. J. Lear.

"This is the place all right," said Penny.

Just inside the gate stood an ancient domicile that by daylight was shaded by a giant sycamore. Built of small bricks, it had latticed windows, and a gabled front. An iron weathercock perched on the curling shingle roof seemed to gaze saucily down at the girls.

Going around the house to the back yard, Penny and Louise again came within view of the blazing fire. An old woman in a long black dress bent over the smoke-blackened kettle which hung from the iron crane. Hearing footsteps, she glanced up alertly.

"Who is it?" she called, and the crackled voice was sharp rather than friendly.

"Silas Malcom sent us here," Penny said, moving into the arc of flickering light.

"And who be you? Friends o' his?" The hatchet-faced woman peered intently, almost suspiciously at the two girls.

Penny gave her name and Louise's, adding that they were seeking lodging for the night.

"We'll pay, of course," she added.

The old woman scrutinized the girls for so long that they were certain she would send them away. But when she spoke, her voice was friendly.

"Well, well," she cackled, "anybody that's a friend of Silas is a friend of mine. You're welcome to bed and board fer as long as you want to stay."

Penny thanked her and stepped closer to the kettle. "We've not had anything to eat since noon," she said suggestively. "My, whatever you're cooking looks good!" She sniffed at the steam arising from the iron pot and backed hastily away.

Old Mrs. Lear broke into cackling laughter. "You gals don't want none o' that! This here is soap and I'm head over heels in it. That's why I'm workin' so late."

"Soap," repeated Penny with deep respect. "Why, I thought soap was made in a factory."

Mrs. Lear was pleased at the girl's interest. "Most of it is," she said, "but not my soap. This here is homemade soap and I wouldn't trade a cake of it for all the store soap ye can lug home—not for heavy cleanin', I wouldn't."

Moving near enough to the fire to see the greasy mixture bubbling in the kettle, Penny asked Mrs. Lear if she would explain how soap was made.

"Bless you, yes," the old lady replied with enthusiasm. "You are the first gal I ever ran across that was interested in anything as old fashioned as soap makin'. Why, when I was young every girl knew how to make soap and was proud of it. But nowadays! All the girls think about is gaddin' and dancin' and having dates with some worthless good-for-nothin'. Come right up to the fire and I'll show you something about soap makin'."

Mrs. Lear poked the glowing logs beneath the kettle.

"First thing," she explained, "is to get your fire good and hot. Then you add your scrap grease."

"What is scrap grease?" Louise asked, greatly intrigued.

"Why, bless you, child, that's the odds and ends of cookin' that most folks throw away. Not me though. I make soap of it. Even if it ain't so good smellin' it's better soap than you can buy."

The girls looked over the rim of the steaming kettle and saw a quantity of bubbling fats. With surprising dexterity for one of her age, Mrs. Lear inserted a long-handled hoe-shaped paddle and stirred the mixture vigorously.

"Next thing ye do is to cook in the lye," she in-

structed. "Then you let it cool off and slice it to any size you want. This mess'll soon be ready."

"And that's all there is to making soap," Penny said, a bit amazed in spite of herself.

"All but a little elbow grease and some git up and git!" the old lady chuckled. "Them two commodities are mighty scarce these days."

While the girls watched, Mrs. Lear poured off the soap mixture. She would not allow them to help lest they burn themselves.

"I kin tell that you girls are all tuckered out," she said when the task was finished. "Just put your horses in the barn and toss 'em some corn and hay. While you're gone I'll clean up these soap makin' things and start a mess o' victuals cookin'."

Mrs. Lear waved a bony hand toward a large, unpainted outbuilding. Louise and Penny led their horses to it, opening the creaking old barn door somewhat cautiously. A sound they could not instantly identify greeted their ears.

"What was that?" Louise whispered, holding back.

"Only a horse gnawing corn!" Penny chuckled.

"Mrs. Lear must keep a steed of her own."

It was dark in the barn even with the doors left wide open. Groping their way to empty stalls, the girls unsaddled and tied the horses up for the night. Mrs. Lear's animal, they noted, was a high-spirited animal, evidently a thoroughbred.

"A riding horse too," Penny remarked. "Wonder how she can afford to keep it?"

Finding corn in the bin, the girls fed Bones and White Foot, and forked them an ample supply of hay.

"Now to feed ourselves," Penny sighed as they left the barn. "My stomach feels as empty as the Grand Canyon!"

The girls had visions of a bountiful supper cooked over the camp fire. However, Mrs. Lear was putting out the glowing coals with a bucket of water.

"Come into the house," she urged. "It won't take me long to git a meal knocked up. That is, if you ain't too particular."

"Anything suits us," Louise assured her.

"And the more of it, the better," Penny muttered, though under her breath.

Mrs. Lear led the way to the house, advising the girls to wait at the door until she could light a kerosene lamp. By its ruddy glow they saw a kitchen, very meagerly furnished with old-fashioned cook stove, a homemade table and a few chairs.

"While you're washin' up I'll put on some victuals to cook," Mrs. Lear said, showing the girls a wash basin and pitcher. "It won't take me a minute."

With a speed that was amazing, the old lady lighted the cook stove and soon had a bed of glowing coals. She warmed up a pan of potatoes, fried salt pork and hominy. From a pantry shelf she brought wild grape

jelly and a loaf of homemade bread. To complete the meal she set before the girls a pitcher of milk and a great glass dish brimming with canned peaches.

"It ain't much," she apologized.

"Food never looked better," Penny declared, drawing a chair to the kitchen table.

"It's a marvelous supper!" Louise added, her eyes fairly caressing the food.

Mrs. Lear sat down at the table with the girls and seemed to take keen delight in watching them eat. Whenever their appetites lagged for an instant she would pass them another dish.

"Now that you've et, tell me who you are and why you came," Mrs. Lear urged after the girls had finished. "You say Silas sent you?"

Good food had stimulated Penny and Louise and made them in a talkative mood. They told of their long trip from Riverview and almost before they realized it, had spoken of the Headless Horseman. Mrs. Lear listened attentively, her watery blue eyes dancing with interest. Suddenly Penny cut her story short, conscious that the old lady deliberately was pumping her of information.

"So you'd like to collect Mr. Burmaster's reward?" Mrs. Lear chuckled.

"We shouldn't mind," Penny admitted. "Besides, we'd be doing the Burmasters a good turn to help them get rid of their ghost rider."

"That you would," agreed the old lady exactly as if the Burmasters were her best friends. "Yes, indeed, you've come in a good cause."

"Then perhaps you can help us," Louise said eagerly. "You must have heard about the Headless Horseman."

Mrs. Lear nodded brightly.

"Perhaps you know who the person is," Penny added.

"Maybe, maybe not." Mrs. Lear shrugged, and getting quickly up, began to carry the dishes to the sink. The firm tilt of her thin chin warned the girls that so far as she was concerned, the topic was closed.

Rather baffled, Penny and Louise made a feeble attempt to reopen the conversation. Failing, they offered to wipe the dishes for their hostess.

"Oh, it ain't no bother to do 'em myself," Mrs. Lear said, shooing them away. "You both look tired enough to drop. Just go up to the spare bedroom and slip beneath the covers."

Louise and Penny needed no further urging. Carrying their knapsacks and a lamp Mrs. Lear gave them, they stumbled up the stairs. The spare bedroom was a huge, rather cold chamber, furnished with a giant fourposter bed and a chest of drawers. The only floor covering was a homemade rag rug.

Louise quickly undressed and left Penny to blow out the light. The latter, moving to the latticed win-

dow, stood for a moment gazing out across the moonlit fields toward the Burmaster estate.

"Nothing makes sense about this trip," she remarked.

From the bed came a muffled: "Now you're talking!"

Ignoring the jibe, Penny resumed: "Did you notice how Mrs. Lear acted just as if the Burmasters were her friends."

"Perhaps she did that to throw us off the track. She asked us plenty of questions but she didn't tell us one thing!"

"Yet she knows plenty. I'm convinced of that."

"Oh, come on to bed," Louise pleaded, yawning. "Can't you do your speculating in the morning?"

With a laugh, Penny leaped into the very center of the feather bed, missing her chum's anatomy by inches.

Soon Mrs. Lear came upstairs. She tapped softly on the door and inquired if the girls had plenty of covers. Assured that they were comfortable, she went on down the hall to her own room.

Worn from the long horseback ride, Louise fell asleep almost at once. Penny felt too excited to be drowsy. She lay staring up at the ceiling, reflecting upon the day's events. So far, the journey to the Valley had netted little more than sore muscles.

"Yet there's mystery and intrigue here—I know

it!" Penny thought. "If only I could get a little tangible information!"

An hour elapsed and still the girl could not sleep. As she stirred restlessly, she heard Mrs. Lear's bedroom door softly creak. In the hallway boards began to tremble. Penny stiffened, listening. Distinctly, she could hear someone tiptoeing past her door to the stairway.

"That must be Mrs. Lear," she thought. "But what can she be doing up at this time of night?"

The question did not long remain unanswered. Boards squeaked steadily as the old lady descended the stairs. A little silence. Then Penny heard two long rings and a short one.

"Mrs. Lear is calling someone on the old-fashioned party-line telephone!" she identified the sound.

Mrs. Lear's squeaky voice carried clearly up the stairway through the half open bedroom door.

"That you, Silas?" Penny heard her say. "Well, those gals got here, just as you said they would! First off they asked me about the Headless Horseman."

A slight pause followed before Mrs. Lear added: "Don't you worry none, Silas. Just count on me! They'll handle soft as kittens!"

And as she ended the telephone conversation, the old lady broke into cackling laughter.

A RICH MAN'S TROUBLES

RAIN WAS drumming on the roof when Penny awakened the next morning. Yawning sleepily, she sat up in bed. Beside her, Louise, curled into a tight ball, slumbered undisturbed. But not for long. Penny tickled an exposed foot until she opened her eyes.

"Get up, Lou!" she ordered pleasantly. "We've overslept."

"Oh, it's still night," Louise grumbled, trying to snuggle beneath the covers again.

Penny stripped off all the blankets and pulled her chum from the bed. "It's only so dark because it's raining," she explained. "Anyway, I have something important to tell you."

As the girls dressed in the cold bedroom, Penny told Louise of the telephone conversation she had heard the previous night.

"Mrs. Lear was talking to Silas Malcom I'm sure," she concluded. "And about us too! She said we'd handle very easily."

Louise's eyes opened a trifle wider. "Then you figure Silas Malcom intended to get us here on purpose!"

"I'm beginning to think so."

"But why?"

"Don't ask me," Penny said with a shrug. "These Valley folk aren't simple by any means! Unless we watch our step they may take us for a merry ride."

"Not with the Headless Horseman, I hope," Louise chuckled. "Why don't we go home this morning and forget the whole silly affair?"

Penny shook her head. "I'm sticking until I find out what's going on here," she announced. "It might mean a story for Dad's paper!"

"Oh, that's only your excuse," Louise teased. "You know you never could resist a mystery, and this one certainly has baffling angles."

The girls washed in a basin of cold water and then went downstairs. Mrs. Lear was baking pancakes in the warm kitchen. She flipped one neatly as she reached with the other hand to remove the coffee pot from the stove.

"Good morning," she chirped. "Did you sleep right last night?"

Penny and Louise agreed that they had and edged close to the stove for warmth. An old-fashioned clock on the mantel showed that it was only eight

o'clock. But eight o'clock for Mrs. Lear was a late hour, judging by the amount of work she had done. A row of glass jars stood on the table, filled with canned plums and peaches.

"You haven't put up all that fruit this morning?" gasped Louise.

Mrs. Lear admitted that she had. "But that ain't much," she added modestly. "Only a bushel and a half. Won't hardly last no time at all."

Mrs. Lear cleared off the kitchen table, set it in a twinkling, and placed before the girls a huge mound of stacked cakes.

"Now eat hearty," she advised. "I had mine hours ago."

As Penny ate, she sought to draw a little information from the eccentric old woman. Deliberately, she brought up the subject of the Burmaster family.

"What is it you want to know?" Mrs. Lear asked, smiling wisely.

"Why is Mrs. Burmaster so disliked in the community?"

"Because she's a scheming, trouble maker if there ever was one!" the old lady replied promptly. "Mr. Burmaster ain't so bad, only he's pulled around by the nose by that weepin', whinin' wife of his."

"Mrs. Burmaster seems to think that the valley folk treat her cruelly."

"She should talk about being cruel!" Mrs. Lear's dark eyes flashed. "You know what them Burmasters done?"

"Only in a general way."

"Well, they come here, and forced folks to git off the land."

"Didn't Mr. Burmaster pay for what he bought?"

"Oh, it was done legal," Mrs. Lear admitted grudgingly. "You see, most o' this valley was owned by a man in the East. He rented it out in parcels, an' never bothered anyone even if they was behind in their payments."

"Then Mr. Burmaster bought the entire track of land from the Eastern owner?" inquired Penny.

"That's right. All except these here four acres where my house sets. They ain't nothin' in this world that will git me in a mood to sell to that old skinflint. He's tried every trick in the bag already."

Penny thoughtfully reached for another pancake. As an impartial judge she could see that there was something to be said on both sides of the question. Mr. Burmaster had purchased his land legally, and so could not be blamed for asking the former renters to move. Yet she sympathized with the farmers who for so many years had considered the valley their own.

"This house o' mine ain't much to look at," Mrs.

Lear commented reflectively, "but it's been home for a long time. Ain't nobody going to get me out o' here."

"You own your own land?" inquired Louise.

"That I do," nodded Mrs. Lear proudly. "I got the deed hid under my bed mattress."

"Won't you tell us about Mr. Burmaster's difficulty with the Headless Horseman," Penny urged, feeling that the old lady was in a talkative mood.

"What do you want to know?" Mrs. Lear asked cautiously.

"Is there really such a thing or is it just a story?"

"If you girls stay in this valley long enough you'll learn fer yourselves," Mrs. Lear chuckled. "I'll warrant you'll see that Horseman."

"And you know who the prankster is!" Penny ventured daringly.

"Maybe I do," Mrs. Lear admitted with a chuckle. "But a ten-mule team couldn't pry it out o' me, and neither can you!"

Before Penny could resume the subject, chickens began to squawk and scatter in the barn yard. A large, expensive looking car pulled up near the side door. Mrs. Lear peeped out of a window and her jaw set in a firm, hard line.

"That's Mr. Burmaster now," she announced in a stage whisper. "Well, he ain't goin' to pressure me. No sir! I'll give him as good as he sends!"

After Mr. Burmaster pounded on the kitchen door, the old lady took her time before she let him in.

"Good morning," he said brightly.

"Humph! What's good about it?" Mrs. Lear shot back. "It's rainin', ain't it? And if we git much more o' it this fall, the dam up Huntley way's goin' to let go shore as I'm a standin' here."

"Nonsense!" replied the estate owner impatiently. He stepped into the kitchen. Seeing Penny and Louise, he looked rather surprised and a trifle embarrassed.

"Go on and say what you come to say," Mrs. Lear encouraged. "Don't stand on no ceremony jus' cause I got city visitors."

Obviously Mr. Burmaster did not like to speak before strangers, but there was no other way.

"You know why I am here, Mrs. Lear," he began. "I've already made several offers for your property—"

"And I've turned 'em all down."

"Yes, but this time I hope you'll listen to reason. Last night my wife had a near collapse after a boy rode a horse across the bridge by our house. All this stupid talk about Headless Horsemen has inspired the community to do mischief. Now every boy in the Valley is trying pranks."

"Then why not ketch the Horseman and put an end to it?" Mrs. Lear asked impudently.

"Nothing would please me better. But we've had

no success. My wife can't endure the strain much longer. It's driving her to a frenzy."

"I'm sorry about that," replied Mrs. Lear stonily. "There ain't nothin' I can do."

"I want you to sell this property," Mr. Burmaster pleaded. "At least that will remove one irritation. You see, my wife considers the place an eyesore. She can see your house from our living room window. It ruins an otherwise perfect view of the valley."

"Now ain't that too bad!" Mrs. Lear's tone was sarcastic. "Well, let me tell you somethin'. That place o' yorn spoils my view too!"

"I'm afraid I haven't made myself clear," Mr. Burmaster said hastily. "It's a matter of my wife's health."

"Your wife ain't no more ailin' than I be," Mrs. Lear retorted. "If she didn't have my house to bother her it would be somethin' else. I ain't goin' to sell and that's all there is to it!"

"You've not heard my offer. I'll give you two thousand dollars for this place—cash."

Mrs. Lear looked a trifle stunned.

"At best the place isn't worth five hundred," Mr. Burmaster resumed. "But I aim to be generous."

"I won't sell," Mrs. Lear said firmly. "Not at any price. Them's my final words."

Mr. Burmaster had kept his voice carefully controlled but the old lady's decision angered him.

"You'll regret this!" he said in a harsh tone. "I've been very patient but I warn you! From now on I shall act in my own interests."

"Have you ever acted in any other?" drawled a voice from behind the estate owner.

Everyone turned quickly. Joe Quigley, the young station agent, stood framed in the open doorway. Smiling at Burmaster in grim way, he came slowly into the kitchen.

STRAIGHT FROM THE SHOULDER

A SILENCE had fallen upon those in the room. Joe Quigley shook rain drops from his overcoat. Deliberately he took his time hanging the coat over a chair in front of the cook stove. Then, still smiling in an ironic way, he faced Burmaster.

"I repeat," he challenged, "did you ever act in any manner except for your own interest?"

"You are insulting! Insolent!" Mr. Burmaster snapped. "But I'll not be drawn into an argument with you. Good morning!"

Quigley blocked the door. "Not so fast," he drawled. "Matter of fact, I was on my way to your house. Saw your car standing in Mrs. Lear's yard, so I figured you were here."

"If you have a telegram for me I'll take it."

"The only message I have is a verbal one," answered Quigley. "Our mayor from Delta, Bradley Mason, asked me to talk to you about the Huntley Dam."

"The subject doesn't interest me."

"It should interest every man, woman and child in this valley!" Quigley retorted. "If the dam gives way flood waters will sweep straight down the valley. Your house would be destroyed before you knew there was any danger!"

"Really?" Mr. Burmaster's smile was a sneer. "Let me worry about my own property."

"As a matter of record, I don't lose any sleep over you," Quigley responded heatedly. "But I am thinking about Mrs. Lear and the people living in Delta. Not to mention the towns on down the line which would be in the direct path of the flood."

"If the good people of Delta are endangered why don't they repair the dam themselves?"

"For the reason that we can't raise the money. We've tried."

"Then the State should act in the matter. I'm willing to write my senator—"

"Repairs are needed now, not three months later. Mr. Burmaster, you have the money and you'd be doing the community a great service to lend help. We're not asking for a donation. It's as much to your interest as ours to protect the valley."

"There's no danger," Burmaster said angrily. "Not a particle. It's only a scheme to shake me down for money."

Brushing past the station agent, the man went out

into the rain. In driving out of the yard he turned the car so sharply that it skidded on its wheels.

"Well, that's that," Quigley remarked with a shrug. "I should have saved my breath."

"I'm glad *he's* gone," Mrs. Lear announced tartly. "Will you have a bite o' breakfast, Joe?"

"No, thanks," the young station agent replied. "I'm due for my trick at the Depot in twenty minutes. Have to run along."

The girls were sorry to see Joe Quigley go so soon for they had hoped to have a long talk with him. After he had disappeared into the rain they tried without much success to draw more information from Mrs. Lear. The old lady was in no mood to discuss the Burmasters, but she did have a great deal to say about flood danger to the valley.

"'Tain't usual that we have so much rain," she declared. "Not at this time o' year. Old Red River's floodin' to the brim, an keeps pourin' more and more into the Huntley Lake basin. The dam there was built years ago and it wasn't much to brag on from the start."

"Haven't authorities inspected the dam recently?" Penny inquired thoughtfully.

"Oh, some young whippersnapper come here a month ago and took a quick look and said the dam would hold," Mrs. Lear replied, tossing her head.

"But he ain't livin' in the Valley. We want repairs made and we want 'em quick—not next year."

"Since Mr. Burmaster refuses to help is there nothing that can be done?"

"There's some as thinks a little piece in the city papers might help," Mrs. Lear said, giving Penny a quick, shrewd glance. "Your pa's a newspaper owner, ain't he?"

"Yes, he owns the *Riverview Star*."

Penny gazed across the table at Louise. It struck both girls that Mrs. Lear was very well informed about their affairs. How had the old lady learned that Mr. Parker was a newspaper man if not from Silas Malcom? More than ever Penny was convinced that she had been lured to Red Valley, perhaps for the purpose of interesting her famous father in the Huntley Dam project.

"You've been very kind, Mrs. Lear," she said, abruptly arising from the table. "Louise and I appreciate your hospitality. However, we want to pay for our room and meals before we go."

"You don't owe me a penny," the old lady laughed. "Furthermore, you ain't leavin' yet."

"We must. There's an afternoon train—"

"And there'll be another along tomorrow. Why, you'd catch your death o' cold ridin' hoss back all the way to Hobostein."

"The rain should let up soon."

"It should, but it won't," Mrs. Lear declared. "Why don't you stay until tomorrow anyhow? Then you could go to the barn dance tonight at Silas' place."

At the moment, the girls were not greatly intrigued at the prospect of attending a barn dance. The steady rain had depressed them. Though the long journey to Red Valley had proven interesting, it scarcely seemed worth the exhausting effort. They had learned very little about the so-called Headless Horseman and doubted that any truly valuable information would come their way.

"If you stay over maybe you'll git a chance to see that hoss-ridin' ghost," Mrs. Lear said slyly. "Seems like it's mostly on bad nights that he does his prowlin'."

The girls helped with the dishes. They made their bed and watched Mrs. Lear sew on a rag rug. At intervals they wandered to the windows. Rain fell steadily, showing not the slightest sign of a let up.

"Didn't I tell you," Mrs. Lear said gleefully. "It's settlin' for a good healthy pour. You might jest as well calculate on stayin' another night."

"But our parents will be expecting us home," Louise protested.

"Send 'em a wire from Delta," Mrs. Lear urged. "Reckon this rain'll maybe slacken a bit come afternoon."

Throughout the long morning Louise and Penny wandered restlessly about the house. Now and then they sought without success to draw information from Mrs. Lear about the mysterious prankster. From the merry twinkle in her eyes they were convinced she knew a great deal. Pry it from her they could not.

"Maybe that Headless Horseman ain't nobody human," she chuckled. "Maybe it's a real haunt. I mind the time somebody witched my cow. The stubborn critter didn't give no milk for eight days steady."

Penny and Louise weren't sure whether the old lady was serious or trying to tease them. After awhile they gave up attempting to solve such an enigma. By noon they had reconciled themselves to staying another night at Red Valley. However, scarcely had they made their decision to remain, than the sky cleared.

"We're stuck here anyway," Penny sighed. "We couldn't possibly ride our horses back to Hobostein in time to catch the afternoon train."

After luncheon the girls hiked across-fields to the picturesque little town of Delta. There they dropped in at the depot to chat with Joe Quigley and send a telegram to their parents.

"If time's heavy on your hands why not take a little jaunt to the Huntley Dam?" the station agent suggested. "It should be well worth your time."

Penny and Louise decided to do just that. At Mrs.

Lear's once more, they saddled their horses and took the pike road to a well-marked trail which led up into the hills. Ditches were brimming with fast running water, yet there was no other evidence of flood.

"Do you suppose all this talk about the dam being weak is just talk?" Penny speculated as they rode along. "In case of real danger one would think State authorities would step into the picture."

Soon the girls came to the winding Red River. Swollen by the fall rains, the current raced madly over rocks and stones. The roar of rushing water warned them that they were close to the dam. In another moment they glimpsed a mighty torrent of water pouring in a silvery white ribbon over the high barrier.

Men could be seen working doggedly as they piled sandbag upon sandbag to strengthen the weakened structure.

Suddenly Penny noticed a man and woman who wore raincoats, watching the workmen.

"Lou, there's Mr. and Mrs. Burmaster!" she exclaimed.

They drove closer to the dam. Mr. and Mrs. Burmaster were talking so earnestly together that they did not observe the newcomers. The roar of water drowned the sound of hoofbeats. But the wind blew directly toward the girls. Mrs. Burmaster's voice, shrill and angrily, came to them clearly:

"You can't do it, John! I won't allow it!" she admonished her husband. "You're not to give the people of this valley one penny! The dam is perfectly safe."

"I'm not so sure," he said, pointing to the far side of the structure.

As he spoke a tiny portion of the dam seemed to melt away. The girls, watching tensely, saw several sandbags swept over the brink. Workmen raced to repair the damage. Mrs. Burmaster seemed stunned by the sight, but only for an instant.

"I don't care!" she cried. "Not a penny of our money goes into this dam! It will hold. Anyway, I'd rather drown than be bested by that hateful old lady Lear!"

"But Matilda—"

"Don't speak to me of it again! Get her out of this Valley—tear down her shack! If you don't, I warn you, I'll take matters into my own hands!"

Turning abruptly, Mrs. Burmaster walked angrily down the trail.

BARN DANCE

MR. BURMASTER was too distracted to pay heed to Penny and Louise. Brushing past them, he hastened after his wife.

Neither of the girls commented upon the conversation they had overheard. For a long while they sat on their horses, gazing in awe at the tumbling water.

"If ever that dam should let go—" Penny shuddered, "why, the valley would be flooded in just a few minutes. I doubt folks could be warned in time."

"It looks as if it could give way any second too," Louise added uneasily. "Why don't we get out of this valley and stay away?"

"And forget the mystery?"

"A lot of good a mystery would do us if that dam lets go! Penny, we were crazy to come here in the first place!"

"But I want to get a big story for Dad's paper. There's one here."

"I know not what course others may take," Louise quoted grandly. "As for myself, I'm going home on tomorrow's train—rain or shine."

"We'll both have to go," Penny agreed in a discouraged tone. "I had my chance here, but somehow I've muffed it."

For a half hour longer the girls remained at the dam watching the workmen. Presently returning to the Lear cottage they found Mrs. Lear in the warm kitchen, cooking supper.

"I'm settin' the victuals on early tonight," she announced. "We ain't got any too much time to git to the frolic at Silas' place."

Penny and Louise were not sure that they cared to attend the barn dance. Mrs. Lear, however, was deaf to all excuses. She whisked supper onto the table and the instant dishes were done, said that she would hitch Trinidad to the buggy.

"It won't take us long to git there," she encouraged the girls as they reluctantly followed her to the barn. "Trinidad's a fast steppin' critter. Best horse in the county fer that matter."

Soon the ancient buggy was rattling at a brisk clip along the winding woodland road. Mrs. Lear allowed Trinidad to slacken pace as they neared the Burmaster estate.

"Look at that house!" she chortled, waving her buggy whip. "Every light in the place lit up! Know

why? Mrs. Burmaster's afeared o' her shadder. Come dark and she's skeared to stick her nose out the door."

"You don't seem to be afraid of anything," Penny remarked in admiration.

"Me afeared?" the old lady laughed gleefully. "What's there to be skeared of?"

"Well—perhaps a certain Headless Horseman."

Mrs. Lear hooted. "If I was to see that critter a-comin' right now and he had twenty heads, I wouldn't even bat an eye!"

Horse and buggy approached the giant tulip tree whose gnarled branches were twisted into fantastic shapes. "See that tree?" Mrs. Lear demanded. "In Revolutionary days a traitor was hanged from that lower limb. Sometimes you kin still hear his spirit sighin' and moanin'."

"You mean the wind whistling through the tree limbs," Penny supplied.

"Didn't sound like wind to me," Mrs. Lear corrected with a grin. "There's some that's afeared to pass under this tree come night—but not me!"

The buggy rattled on, its top brushing against the overhanging branches of the giant tulip. It had grown very dark and the shadows of the woods had a depressing effect upon the girls. They were glad to see the lights of the Malcom place on the hill and even more pleased to drive into the yard.

"You gals go right on in," Mrs. Lear advised, leap-

ing lightly from the buggy. "I'll look after Trinidad."

The barn dance already was in progress. Crossing the yard, the girls could hear gay laughter above the lively squeak of fiddles. Through the open barn door they glimpsed a throng of young people whirling in the intricate steps of a square dance.

"We're certain to be wall flowers at a party such as this," Louise remarked sadly.

The girls found themselves a quiet corner from which to watch the merry-makers. However, they were not permitted to remain there. At the end of the first dance, Joe Quigley came to ask Penny for a dance. To Louise's secret joy he brought along a young man who promptly invited her to be his partner.

"But we don't know how to square dance," Penny protested.

"Won't take you long to learn," Joe chuckled, pulling her to her feet.

The fiddler broke into a lively tune. Silas Malcom, acting as caller, shouted boisterous directions to the dancers: "Balance all, balance eight, swing 'em like a-swingin' on a gate."

Joe Quigley, expert dancer that he was, fairly swept Penny through the intricate formations. Before she hardly was aware of it, the dance was over and Silas' called out: "Meet your partner and promenade home."

After that the girls did not lack for partners. The night sped on magic wings. Penny danced many times with Joe and ate supper with him. Then, noticing that the party was starting to break up, she looked about for Mrs. Lear. The old lady was nowhere to be seen. Nor could Louise recall having seen her for the past half hour. Somewhat disturbed, they crossed the room to talk to old Silas Malcom.

"Mrs. Lear went home a good hour ago," he told them. "She said she had to git some sleep, but you gals was havin' so much fun she didn't have the heart to take you away."

Penny and Louise could not hide their consternation. With Mrs. Lear gone they would have no way of getting back to the cottage.

"Don't you worry none," Old Silas chuckled. "Joe Quigley will take you home. An' if he don't there's plenty o' young bucks waitin' fer the chanst."

The arrangement was not in the least to the girls' liking. The party, they could see, rapidly was breaking up. Joe Quigley seemed to have disappeared. Nearly all of the girls except themselves were supplied with escorts.

"I don't like this—not by a little bit!" Penny muttered. "Let's get out of here, Lou."

"How will we get back to Mrs. Lear's place?"

"Walk."

"Without an escort?"

"It's not far."

"We'll have to pass the Burmaster place and that horrid tulip tree."

"Who's afraid of a tulip tree?" Penny laughed. "Come on, if we don't get away quickly Old Silas will ask some young man to take us home. That would be humiliating."

Louise reluctantly followed her chum. The girls obtained their wraps and without attracting attention, slipped out a side door.

"Why do you suppose Mrs. Lear slipped off without saying a word?" Louise complained as she and Penny walked rapidly along the dark, muddy road. "Our shoes will be ruined!"

"So is my ego!" Penny added irritably. "Joe Quigley certainly let us down too. He was attentive enough until after supper. Then he simply vanished."

The night was very dark for driving clouds had blotted out the stars. Overhanging trees cast a cavernous gloom upon the twisting hillside road. Louise caught herself shivering. Sternly she told herself that it came from the cold air rather than nervousness.

Presently the girls approached the Burmaster estate. No lights were burning, but the rambling building loomed up white and ghost-like through the trees.

"I'll breathe natural when we're across the bridge,"

Penny admitted with a laugh. "If Mr. Burmaster keeps a guard hidden in the bushes, the fellow might heave a rock at us on general principles."

There was no sign of anyone near the estate. Yet both Penny and Louise sensed that they were being watched. The unpleasant sensation of uneasiness increased as they drew nearer the foot bridge.

"Penny, I'm scared," Louise suddenly admitted.

"Of what?" Penny asked with forced cheerfulness.

"It's too quiet."

The half-whispered words died on Louise's lips. Unexpectedly, the stillness of the night was broken by the clatter of hoofbeats.

Startled, the girls whirled around. A horse with a rider had plunged through the dense bushes only a short distance behind them. At a hard run he came straight toward the foot bridge.

"The ghost rider!" Louise whispered in terror.

She and Penny stood frozen in their tracks. Plainly they could see the white-robed figure. His lumpy, misshapen hulk, seemed rigidly fastened to the horse. Where his head should have been there was only a stub.

CHAPTER

11

THE HEADLESS HORSEMAN

SWIFT AS the wind, the headless horseman approached the narrow bridge. Penny seized Louise's hand, jerking her off the road. The ghost rider thundered past them onto the bridge planks which resounded beneath the steel-shod hoofs.

"Jeepers creepers!" Penny whispered. "That's no boy prankster this time! It's the real thing!"

The thunder of hoofbeats had not gone unheard by those within the walls of Sleepy Hollow. Lights flashed on in the house. Two men with lanterns came running from the mill shack.

"Get him! Get him!" screamed a woman's voice from an upstairs window of the house.

The clamor did not seem to disturb the goblin rider. At unchanged pace he clattered across the bridge to its far side. As the two men ran toward him, he suddenly swerved, plunging his horse across a ditch and up a steep bank. There he drew rein for an instant.

Rising in his stirrups, he hurled a small, hard object at the two guards. It missed them by inches and fell with a thud on the bridge. Then with a laugh that resembled no earthly sound, the Headless Horseman rode through a gap in the bushes and was gone.

Louise and Penny ran to the bridge. Half way across they found the object that had been hurled. It was a small, round stone to which had been fastened a piece of paper.

Penny picked up the missile. Before she could examine it, Mr. Burmaster came running from the house. He had not taken time to dress, but had thrown a bathrobe over his pajamas.

"You let that fellow get away again!" he shouted angrily to the two workmen. "Can't you ever stay on the job?"

"See here, Mr. Burmaster," one of the men replied. "We work eight hours a day and then do guard duty at night. You can't expect us to stay awake twenty-four hours a day!"

"All right, all right," Mr. Burmaster retorted irritably. Turning toward the bridge he saw Louise and Penny. "Well, so you're here again?" he observed, though not in an unfriendly tone.

Penny explained that she and Louise had attended the barn dance and were on their way to the Lear cabin.

"What's that you have in your hand?" he interrupted.

"A stone that the Headless Horseman threw at your workmen. There's a paper tied to it."

"Let's have it," Mr. Burmaster commanded.

Penny handed over the stone though she would have preferred to have examined it herself. Mr. Burmaster cut the string which kept the paper in place. He held it beneath one of the lanterns.

Large capital letters cut from newspaper headlines had been pasted in an uneven row across the page. The words spelled a message which read:

"KICK IN HANDSOMELY ON THE HUNTLEY DAM FUND. IF YOU OBLIGE, THE GALLOPING GHOST WILL BOTHER YOU NO MORE."

Mr. Burmaster read the message aloud and crumpling the paper, stuffed it into the pocket of his robe.

"There, you see!" he cried angrily. "It's all a plot to force me to put up money for the Huntley Dam!"

"Who do you think the prankster is?" Penny asked.

"How should I know!" Mr. Burmaster stormed. "The townspeople of Delta may be behind the scheme. Or those hill rats like Silas Malcom! Then it could be Old Lady Lear."

"Can she ride a horse?" Louise interposed.

"Can that old witch ride?" Mr. Burmaster snorted.

"She was born in a saddle. Has one of the best horses in the valley too. A jumper."

Penny and Louise thought of Trinidad with new respect. Not without misgiving they recalled that Mrs. Lear had slipped away from the barn dance ahead of them. Wisely they kept the knowledge to themselves.

"I'll give a thousand dollars for the capture of that rascal!" Mr. Burmaster went on. "And if it proves to be Mrs. Lear I'll add another five hundred."

"Why, not be rid of the Ghost in an easier way?" Penny suggested. "Give the money to the Huntley Dam Fund."

"Never! I'll not be blackmailed! Besides, the rains are letting up. There's no danger."

Penny and Louise did not attempt to argue the matter. The Huntley Dam feud was none of their concern. By the following day they expected to be far from the valley.

"There's another person who might be behind this," Mr. Burmaster continued. "A newspaper editor at Hobostein. He always hated me and he's been using his paper to write ugly editorials. I ought to sue him for slander."

Though the Headless Horseman episode had excited the girls, they were tired and eager to get to Mrs. Lear's. Accordingly, they cut the conversation short and started on down the road. Mr. Burmaster

fell into step walking with them as far as the house.

"Come to see us sometime," he invited with a cordiality that astonished the girls. "Mrs. Burmaster gets very lonesome. She's nervous but she means well."

"I'm sure she does," Penny responded kindly. She hesitated, then added: "I do hope you catch the prankster. Have you considered putting a barricade at the end of the bridge?"

"Can't do it. When we built this place we had to agree to keep the footbridge open to pedestrians."

"Suppose one had a moveable barrier," Penny suggested. "Couldn't your workmen keep watch and swing it into place after the Horseman started across the bridge? With one at each end he'd be trapped."

"It's an idea to be considered," Mr. Burmaster admitted. "The only trouble is that my workmen aren't worth their salt as guards. But we'll see."

Penny and Louise soon bade the estate owner good-night and went on down the road. Once beyond hearing they discussed the possibility that Mrs. Lear might have masqueraded as the Headless Horseman.

"It was queer the way she disappeared from the dance," Penny speculated. "Granting that she's a spry old lady, I doubt she'd have it in her to pull off the trick."

"I'm not so sure," Louise argued. "Mr. Burmaster said she was a wonderful rider. Didn't you think that horse tonight looked like Trinidad?"

"Goodness, it was too dark to see! In any case, what about the buggy?"

"Mrs. Lear could have unhitched it somewhere in the woods."

Penny shook her head. "It doesn't add up somehow. For that matter, nothing about this affair does."

Rounding a curve, the girls came within view of the Lear cabin. No light burned, but they took it for granted Mrs. Lear had gone to bed.

"Let's give a look-see in the barn," Penny proposed. "I want to make sure that our horses are all right."

"And to see that the buggy is there too," laughed Louise.

They went past the dripping water trough to the barn and opened the doors. White Foot nickered. Bones kicked at the stall boards. Penny tossed both horses a few ears of corn and then walked on to Trinidad's stall. It was empty. Nor was there any evidence of a buggy.

"Well, what do you think of that!" Penny commented. "Mrs. Lear's not been home!"

"Then maybe Mr. Burmaster's theory is right!" Louise exclaimed, staring at the empty stall. "Mrs. Lear could have been the one!"

"Listen!" commanded Penny.

Plainly the girls could hear a horse and vehicle coming down the road. It was Mrs. Lear, and a moment later she turned into the yard. Penny swung open

the barn doors. Trinidad rattled in and pulled up short. His sleek body was covered with sweat as if he had been driven hard.

Mrs. Lear leaped lightly to the barn floor and began to unhitch the horse.

"Well, I'm mighty glad to find you here," she chirped. "Joe brought you home, didn't he?"

Penny replied that she and Louise had walked.

"You don't say!" the old woman exclaimed. "I went down the road a piece to see a friend o' mine. By the time I got back the frolic was over. I calculated Joe must have brought you home."

Penny and Louise offered little comment as they helped Mrs. Lear unhitch Trinidad. However, they could see that the old lady was fairly brimming-over with suppressed excitement.

"It's late, but I ain't one bit tired," Mrs. Lear declared as they all entered the house. "There's somethin' mighty stimulin' about a barn dance."

Penny was tempted to remark that her hostess had spent very little time at Silas Malcom's place. Instead she remained silent.

The girls went at once to bed. Mrs. Lear did not follow them upstairs immediately, but puttered about the kitchen preparing herself a midnight snack. Finally her step was heard on the stairs.

"Good night, girls," she called cheerfully as she passed their door. "Sleep tight."

Mrs. Lear entered her own bedroom. Her door squeaked shut. A shoe was heard to thud on the floor, then another.

"I wish I knew what to think," Penny confided to Louise in a whisper. "She's the queerest old lady—"

Louise had no opportunity to reply. For both girls were startled to hear a shrill cry from the far end of the hall.

The next instant their bedroom door burst open. Mrs. Lear, grotesque in old fashioned flannel nightgown, staggered into the room.

"Why, what's wrong?" Penny asked in astonishment.

"I've been robbed!" Mrs. Lear proclaimed wildly. "I've been robbed!"

CHAPTER

12

PREMONITIONS

PENNY LEAPED out of bed and touched a match to the wick of an oil lamp. In its flickering yellow glow Mrs. Lear looked as pale as a ghost.

"While we were at the barn dance someone broke into the house," the old lady explained in an agitated voice. "The deed's gone! Now I'll be put off my land like the others. Oh, lawseeme, I wisht I was dead!"

"What deed do you mean?" Penny asked, perplexed.

"Why, the deed to this house and my land! I've always kept it under the mattress o' my bed. Now it's gone!"

"Isn't the deed recorded?"

"No, it ain't. I always calculated on havin' it done, but I wanted to save the fee long as I could. Figured to have the property put in my son's name jes' before

I up and died. He's married and livin' in Omaha. Now see what a mess I'm in."

"If the deed is lost and not recorded, you are in difficulties," Penny agreed.

"Perhaps it isn't lost," said Louise, encouragingly.

"Did you search everywhere, Mrs. Lear?"

"I pulled the bed half to pieces."

"We'll help you look for it," Penny offered. "It must be here somewhere."

"This is the fust time in twenty years that anyone ever stole anything off me," the old lady wailed as she led the way down the dark hall. "But I kinda knowed somethin' like this was goin' to happen."

Mrs. Lear's bedroom was in great disorder. Blankets had been strewn over the floor and the limp mattress lay doubled up on the springs.

"You see!" the old lady cried. "The deed's gone! I've looked everywhere."

Penny and Louise carefully folded all the blankets. They straightened the mattress and searched carefully along the springs. They looked beneath the bed. The missing paper was not to be found.

"Are you sure you didn't hide it somewhere else?" Penny asked.

"Fer ten years I've kept that deed under the bed mattress!" the old lady snapped. "Oh, it's been stole all right. An' there's the tracks o' the thievin' rascal that did it too!"

Mrs. Lear lowered the oil lamp closer to the floor. Plainly visible were the muddy heelprints of a woman's shoe. The marks had left smudges on the rag rugs which dotted the room; they crisscrossed the bare floor to the door, the window and the bed. Penny and Louise followed the trail down the hallway to the stairs. They picked it up again in the kitchen and there lost it.

"You don't need to follow them tracks no further," Mrs. Lear advised grimly. "I know who it was that stole the deed. There ain't nobody could o' done it but Mrs. Burmaster!"

"Mrs. Burmaster!" Louise echoed, rather stunned by the accusation.

"She'd move Heaven and Earth to git me off this here bit o' land. She hates me; and I hate her."

"But how could Mrs. Burmaster know you had the deed?" Penny asked. "You never told her, did you?"

"Seems to me like oncst in an argument I did say somethin' about having it here in the house," Mrs. Lear admitted. "We was goin' it hot and heavy one day, an' I don't remember jest what I did tell her. Too much, I reckon."

The old lady sat down heavily in a chair by the stove. She looked sick and beaten.

"Don't take it so hard," Penny advised kindly. "You can't be sure that Mrs. Burmaster stole the deed."

"Who else would want it?"

"Some other person might have done it for spite."

Mrs. Lear shook her head. "So far's I know, I ain't got another enemy in the whole world. Oh, Mrs. Burmaster done it all right."

"But what can she hope to gain?" asked Penny.

"She aims to put me off this land."

"Mr. Burmaster seems like a fairly reasonable man. I doubt he'd make any use of the deed even if his wife turned it over to him."

"Maybe not," Mrs. Lear agreed, "but Mrs. Burmaster ain't likely to give it to her husband. She'll find some other way to git at me. You see!"

Nothing Penny or Louise could say cheered the old lady.

"Don't you worry none about me," she told them. "I'll brew a cup o' tea and take some aspirin. Then maybe I kin think up a way to git that deed back. I ain't through yet—not by a long shot!"

Long after Penny and Louise had gone back to bed the old lady remained in the kitchen. It was nearly three o'clock before they heard her tiptoe upstairs to her room. But at seven the next morning she was abroad as usual and had breakfast waiting for them.

"I've thought things through," she told Penny as she poured coffee from a blackened pot. "It won't do no good to go to Mrs. Burmaster and try to make her give up that deed. I'll jes wait and see what she does fust."

"And in the meantime, the deed may show up," Penny replied. "Even though you think Mrs. Burmaster took it, there's always a chance that it was only misplaced."

"Foot tracks don't lie," the old lady retorted. "I was out lookin' around early this morning. Them prints lead from my door straight toward the Burmasters!"

Deeply as were the girls interested in Mrs. Lear's problem, they knew that they could be of no help to her. Already they had lingered in Red Valley far longer than their original plan. They shuddered to think what their parents would say if and when they returned to Riverview.

"Lou, we have to start for Hobostein right away!" Penny announced. "We'll be lucky if we get there in time to catch a train home."

Mrs. Lear urged her young guests to remain another day, but to her kind invitation they turned deaf ears. In vain they pressed money upon her. She refused to accept anything so Penny was compelled to hide a bill in the teapot where it would be found later.

"You'll come again?" the old lady asked almost plaintively as she bade them goodbye.

"We'll try to," Penny promised, mounting Bones. "But if we do it will be by train."

"I got a feeling I ain't goin' to be here much longer," Mrs. Lear said sadly.

"Don't worry about the deed," Penny tried to cheer her. "Even if Mrs. Burmaster should have it, she may be afraid to try to make trouble for you."

"It ain't just that biddy I'm worried about. It's somethin' deeper." Mrs. Lear's clear gaze swept toward the blue-rimmed hills.

Penny and Louise waited for her to go on. After a moment she did.

"Seen a rain crow a settin' on the fence this morning. There'll be rain an' a lot of it. Maybe the dam will hold, an' again, maybe it won't."

"Shouldn't you move to the hills?" Penny asked anxiously.

Mrs. Lear's answer was a tight smile, hard as granite.

"Nothin' on Earth kin move me off this land. Nothin'. If the flood takes my house it'll take me with it!"

The old lady extended a bony hand and gravely bade each of the girls goodbye.

Penny and Louise rode their horses to the curve of the road and then looked back. Mrs. Lear stood by the gate for all the world like a statue of bronze. They waved a fast farewell but she did not appear to see. Her eyes were raised to the misty hills and she stood thus until the trees blotted her from view.

CHAPTER

13

RAIN

"SOMEHOW I can't get Old Mrs. Lear out of my mind, Lou. I keep wondering what happened at Red Valley after we left."

Penny sprawled on the davenport of the Parker home, one blue wedge draped over its rolling upholstered arm. Her chum, Louise, had curled herself kitten fashion in a chair across the room.

A full week now had elapsed since the two girls had returned to Riverview from Red Valley. During that time it had rained nearly every day. Even now, a misty drizzle kept the girls indoors.

"Wonder if it's raining at Red Valley?" Penny mused.

"Why don't you tear that place out of your mind?" Louise demanded a bit impatiently. "We tried to solve the mystery and we couldn't, so let's forget it."

"I do try, but I can't," Penny sighed. "I keep telling myself Mrs. Lear must be the person who mas-

querades as the Headless Horseman. Yet I can't completely accept such a theory."

"You'll go batty if you keep on!"

"The worst of it is that everyone laughs at me," Penny complained. "If I so much as mention the Headless Horseman Dad starts to crack jokes."

A step sounded on the porch. "Speaking of your father, here he comes now," Louise observed, and straightened in her chair.

Penny did not bother to undrape herself from the davenport. "Lo, Dad," she greeted her father as he came in. "Aren't you home early for lunch?"

"I am about half an hour ahead of schedule," Mr. Parker agreed. He spoke to Louise as he casually dropped an edition of the *Riverview Star* into his daughter's hands. "That town of yours has smashed into print, Penny."

"What town?" Penny's feet came down from the arm of the davenport and she seized the paper. "Not Red Valley?"

"Red Valley is very much in the news," Mr. Parker replied. "These rains are weakening the dam and some of the experts are becoming alarmed. They are sending someone up to look it over."

"Oh, Dad! I tried to tell you!" Penny cried excitedly. With Louise peering over her shoulder, she spread out the front page of the paper and read the story.

"Oh, it hardly tells a thing!" she complained after she had scanned it.

"So far there's not been much to report," Mr. Parker replied. "But if the dam should let go—wow! Would that be a story! I'm sending my best staff photographer there to get pictures."

Penny pricked up her ears. "Salt Sommers?" she demanded.

"Yes, the *Star* can't take a chance on being scooped by another paper."

"Speaking of chances, Lou, this is ours!" Penny cried. "Why don't we go to Red Valley with Salt?"

"Now just a minute," interrupted Mr. Parker. "Salt's going there on business and he'll have no time for any hocus-pocus. You'll be a bother to him!"

"A bother to Salt!" Penny protested indignantly. "Why, the very idea!"

"Another thing," Mr. Parker resumed, "Red Valley isn't considered the safest place in the world just now. While it's unlikely the dam will give way, still the possibility exists. If it should, the break will come without warning and there's apt to be a heavy loss of life."

"But not mine," said Penny with great confidence. "Don't forget that I won three ribbons and a medal this year. Not for being a poor swimmer either."

"All the same, I shouldn't be too boastful," her father advised dryly.

"When is Salt leaving?" Penny demanded.

"Any time now. But I'm sure he won't let you tag along."

"We'll see if we can change his mind," Penny grinned, reaching for the telephone. Disregarding her father's frown, she called the photographer at the *Star* office. Salt was leaving for Red Valley in twenty minutes, and he willingly agreed to take two passengers.

"There, you see!" Penny cried triumphantly, slamming the receiver into its hook.

"I don't like the idea," Mr. Parker grumbled. "Let's hear what Mrs. Weems has to say."

The housekeeper, it developed, had a great deal to say. Penny, however, was equal to all arguments. So eloquently did she plead her case that Mrs. Weems weakened.

"You've wanted an old spinning wheel for months," Penny reminded her. "While I'm at Red Valley I'll get one for you."

"It seems to me I've heard that argument before," Mrs. Weems said dryly.

"I didn't get a chance to see about it when I was there last time," Penny hastened on. "This time I'll make it a point, I promise. I'm pretty sure I can get the one Silas Malcom has."

"If you must go, please don't distract Salt with spinning wheels," Mr. Parker said crossly. "Or

Headless Horseman rot. Remember, he has a job to do."

"Lou and I will help him," Penny laughed. "Just wait and see!"

In the end, Mr. Parker and Mrs. Weems reluctantly said that Penny might go. Louise obtained permission from her mother to make the trip, and fifteen minutes later the girls were at the *Star* office. As they entered the wire photo room, a loudspeaker blared forth: "All right, Riverview, go ahead with your fire picture!"

"Goodness, what was that?" Louise exclaimed, startled.

"Only the wire photo dispatcher talking over the loudspeaker from New York," Penny chuckled. "We're about to send a picture out over the network."

"But how?"

"Watch and see," Penny advised.

In the center of the room stood two machines with cylinders, one for transmitting pictures to distant stations, the other for receiving them. On the sending cylinder was wrapped a glossy 8 by 10 photograph of a fire. As Penny spoke, an attendant pressed a starter switch on the sending machine. There was a high pitched rasp as the clutch threw in, and the cylinder bearing the picture began to turn at a steady measured pace.

"It's a complicated process," Penny said glibly.

"A photo electric cell scans the picture and transmits it to all the points on the network. Salt here could tell you more about it."

"Too busy just now," grinned the young photographer. He stood beside a cabinet stuffing flashbulbs into his coat pocket. "It's time we're traveling."

Salt grinned in a harassed but friendly way at the girls. He was tall and freckled and not very good looking. Nevertheless, he was the best photographer on the *Star*.

"I'm afraid we took advantage of you in asking for a ride to Red Valley," Penny apologized.

"Tickled to have you ride along," Salt cut in. He picked up his Speed Graphic camera and slung a supply case over his shoulder. "Well, let's shove off for the wet country."

The ride by press car to Delta was far from pleasant. Salt drove too fast. The road was slippery once the auto left the pavement and ditches brimmed with brown muddy water.

At one point they were forced to detour five miles to avoid a bridge that had washed out. Instead of reaching Delta early in the day as they had planned, it was well into the afternoon before they arrived.

"Where shall I drop you girls?" Salt inquired wearily. "I'll have to work fast if I get any pictures this afternoon."

"Drop us anywhere," Penny said. "We'll spend

the night with Mrs. Lear and go home by train tomorrow."

"Wonder which way it is to the Huntley Dam?"

"We'll show you the road," Penny offered. "It's directly on your way to let us off at the Malcom place. I want to stop there to see about a spinning wheel."

Guided by the two girls, Salt drove up the winding hillside road to Silas Malcom's little farm. There Penny and Louise said goodbye to him and sought to renew acquaintances with the elderly hillman. The old man got up from a porch rocker to greet them cordially.

"Well! Well! I knowed you'd come back one o' these days," he chuckled. "Thank ye mightily fer puttin' them write-ups about Red Valley in the paper."

"I'm afraid I didn't have much to do with it," Penny said modestly. "Red Valley really is a news center these days."

"We're sittin' on a stick o' dynamite here," the old man agreed. "I'm worried about Mrs. Lear. Me and the wife want her to move up here on the hill where she'd be safe, but not that ole gal. She's as stubborn as a mule."

"And what of the Burmasters?"

"I ain't worrin' none about them. They kin look after themselves. They're so cock sure there ain't no danger."

"Then you feel the situation really is serious?"

Old Silas spat into the grass. "When that dam lets go," he said, "there ain't goin' to be no written notice sent ahead. The Burmaster place will be taken, and then Mrs. Lear's. After that the water'll sweep down on Delta faster'n an express train. From there it'll spread out over the whole valley."

"But why don't people move to safety?"

"Down at Delta plenty of 'em are pullin' up stakes," Old Silas admitted. "The Burmasters are sittin' tight though and so is Mrs. Lear."

"We were planning on staying with her tonight," Louise contributed uneasily.

"Reckon you'll be safe enough," Old Silas assured her. "Water level ain't been risin' none in the last ten hours. But if we have another rain above us—look out."

After chatting a bit longer, Penny broached the matter of the spinning wheel. To her delight, Mr. Malcom not only offered to sell it for a small sum, but he volunteered to haul it to the railroad station for shipment.

The slow, tedious wagon ride down to Delta gave the girls added opportunity to seek information from the old man. Penny deliberately spoke of the Headless Horseman. Had the mysterious rider been seen or heard of in the Valley in recent days?

"You can't prove it by me," the old man chuckled.

"I been so busy gettin' in my crops I ain't had no time fer such goins on."

Arriving at Delta, Mr. Malcom drove directly to the railroad station.

"Joe Quigley ought to be around here somewhere," he remarked. "See if you can run him down while I unload this spinnin' wheel."

Penny and Louise entered the deserted waiting room of the depot. The door of the little station office was closed and at first glance they thought no one was there. Then they saw Joe Quigley standing with his back toward them. He was engrossed in examining something on the floor, an object that was below their field of vision.

"Hello, Mr. Quigley!" Penny sang out.

The station agent straightened so suddenly that he bumped his head against the ticket counter. He stared at the girls. Then as they moved toward the little window, he hastily gathered up whatever he had been examining. As if fearful that they would see the object, he crammed it into an open office closet and slammed the door.

A MOVING LIGHT

"WELL, WELL," Joe Quigley greeted the girls cordially. "It's good to see you again. When did you blow into town?"

Louise and Penny came close to the ticket window. They were curious as to what the young station agent had hidden in the closet. However, they did not disclose by look or action that they suspected anything was wrong.

"We drove in about an hour ago," Penny replied carelessly. "We want to ship a spinning wheel by freight to Riverview."

"I'd advise you to send it by express," Quigley said briskly. "That way you'll have it delivered to your door and the difference will be trifling."

"Any way you say," Penny agreed.

Joe went outside with the girls. Silas already had unloaded the spinning wheel. He turned it over to

the station agent and after a bit of goodnatured joshing, drove away.

"I can get this out for you on No. 73," Joe promised the girls. "Come on back to the office while I bill it out."

Penny and Louise followed the station agent into the little ticket room. Their ears were assailed by the chatter of several telegraph instruments mounted around the edge of a circular work desk.

"How many wires come in here?" Penny asked curiously.

"Three. The Dispatcher's wire, Western Union and the Message wire."

Penny listened attentively to the staccato chatter of one of the wires. "D-A, D-A," she said aloud. "Would that be the Delta station call?"

"It is," Quigley agreed, giving her a quick look of surprise.

He sat down at the circular desk and reached for the telegraph key. After tapping out a swift, brief message, he closed the circuit.

"Get that?" he grinned at Penny.

She shook her head ruefully. "I learned the Morse code and that's about all," she confessed. "I used to practice on a homemade outfit Dad fixed up for me."

"Quite a gal!" Quigley said admiringly. "What can't you do?"

This was Penny's opportunity and she seized it.